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Extreme Makeover: Metroscape Cities Catch on to Recreational Trends

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Metroscape cities catch on to recreational trends.

Burnside Skatepark

by Steve Wilson Photographs by Hermon Joyner

THE BACKGROUND

In the summer of 2005, the City of Portland's Department of Parks and Recreation approved a Skatepark Master Plan to build 19 skateparks and skatespots around the city, joining a nationwide trend that signals a shift in the relationship between municipalities and skateboarders. Dedicated and publicly-approved areas for skateboarding are popping up in towns across the country, demonstrating how skateboarding has become a recreational norm on par with traditional sports such as football, baseball, and basketball. In fact, according to the Sporting Goods Manufacturing Association (SGMA), the number of skateboarders has nearly doubled in the past decade, making it the fastest-growing extreme sport in America; and, according to the National Sporting Goods Association (NSGA), skateboarding is now more popular than tennis.

For a city with probably the world's most famous skatepark, in a state with the highest per capita number of skateboarders in the nation, it is a bit ironic that Portland has decided to build spaces for skaters years after many other towns, many of them nearby. Over 100 communities in Oregon feature at least one dedicated space for skateboarding, making it one of the most skatepark-rich states in the union, and many communities surrounding Portland already have world-class skateparks, including Newberg, McMinnville, and Donald (population 750) in Marion County. For years Portland skaters have left town to skate at these parks, creating crowds in surrounding cities and frustration at home. With about 27,000 skaters in Portland and a sin-

gle municipally-maintained skatepark, skaters feel the time for additional construction is long overdue. However, a growing maturity in the perception of skaters' needs—both by cities and skaters themselves—may turn Portland's tardiness to an advantage, allowing the town and the skaters to learn from the experiences of others.

The decision to build additional skateparks followed voter approval of a 2002 Parks Levy, which included \$500,000 to build two skateparks within city limits. However, following an intense siting process, countless conversations with parks and recreation departments nationally, and the assistance of a group of dedicated, politically-savvy skaters, Portland decided to look beyond two parks. Instead, the city has committed itself to create a citywide web of skateparks in an attempt to build sufficient skating space for all users, to distribute evenly the new recreational assets throughout the city, and to balance the needs of different types of skateboarders. According to Ron Wojtanik, a planner and project manager for Portland Parks and Recreation (PP&R), skateparks are a hot topic at parks and recreation conferences, and most planners he spoke with urged him to look far ahead.

"Most planners wished that they had looked at more locations or identified systems earlier. Instead, they used all their money for one site which was almost immediately overrun."

What the variety and number of skaters in Portland seemed to demand was not one or two parks, but a series of skateable constructions spread through the com-

munity, each focusing on a different physical feature, from swimming pool-like bowls to plazas containing skateable handrails and stairs.

With the help of a group of skaters who formed the Skatepark Leadership Advisory Committee (SPLAT), Wojtanik spent three years identifying potential locations for skateable spaces (usually in existing parks) and meeting with neighborhood representatives before settling on a list that includes 18 new parks and St. Johns' Pier Park Skatepark, the city's only publicly-maintained skatepark. Roughly, the citywide skatepark system will look like this: one 25,000 square foot regional park (about the size of three tennis courts) possibly to be built under the Steel Bridge, several district parks, about 10,000 square feet each, and around a dozen neighborhood skatespots, typically less than 8,000 square feet. The parks and skatespots will be built singly as funding permits.

Currently, with less than \$400,000 of the original \$500,000 levy money left, the city plans to first build a regional park at Glenhaven, in the Madison South neighborhood, and rebuild the existing park in St. Johns. Skaters for Portland Skateparks, a nonprofit fund-raising group organized in part by skater and attorney Tom Miller, has already raised over \$100,000 in private funds for the rebuilding of Pier Park Skatepark, including a \$75,000 grant from Nike. Following the construction of these two parks, the city plans to work on Holly Farm, a new park being created in the West Portland Park neighborhood off Capitol Highway. Wojtanik says that little money remains available for Holly Farm, although this would be a small skatespot, and notes that the city is "working with local private donors and has received a state grant."

The remaining list of skateparks and skatespots, in places like Kenton Park, Alberta Park, Parkrose High School, Woodstock Park and Lents Park, will be prioritized by needs—basically, who is the farthest away from existing skateparks. With the rising cost of concrete and steel, however, funding will remain a hurdle, and neighborhood efforts to make private funding available may ensure more rapid construction of any particular park. If all the parks on the Skatepark Master Plan are not built by 2020, a survey will be taken to determine usage needs.

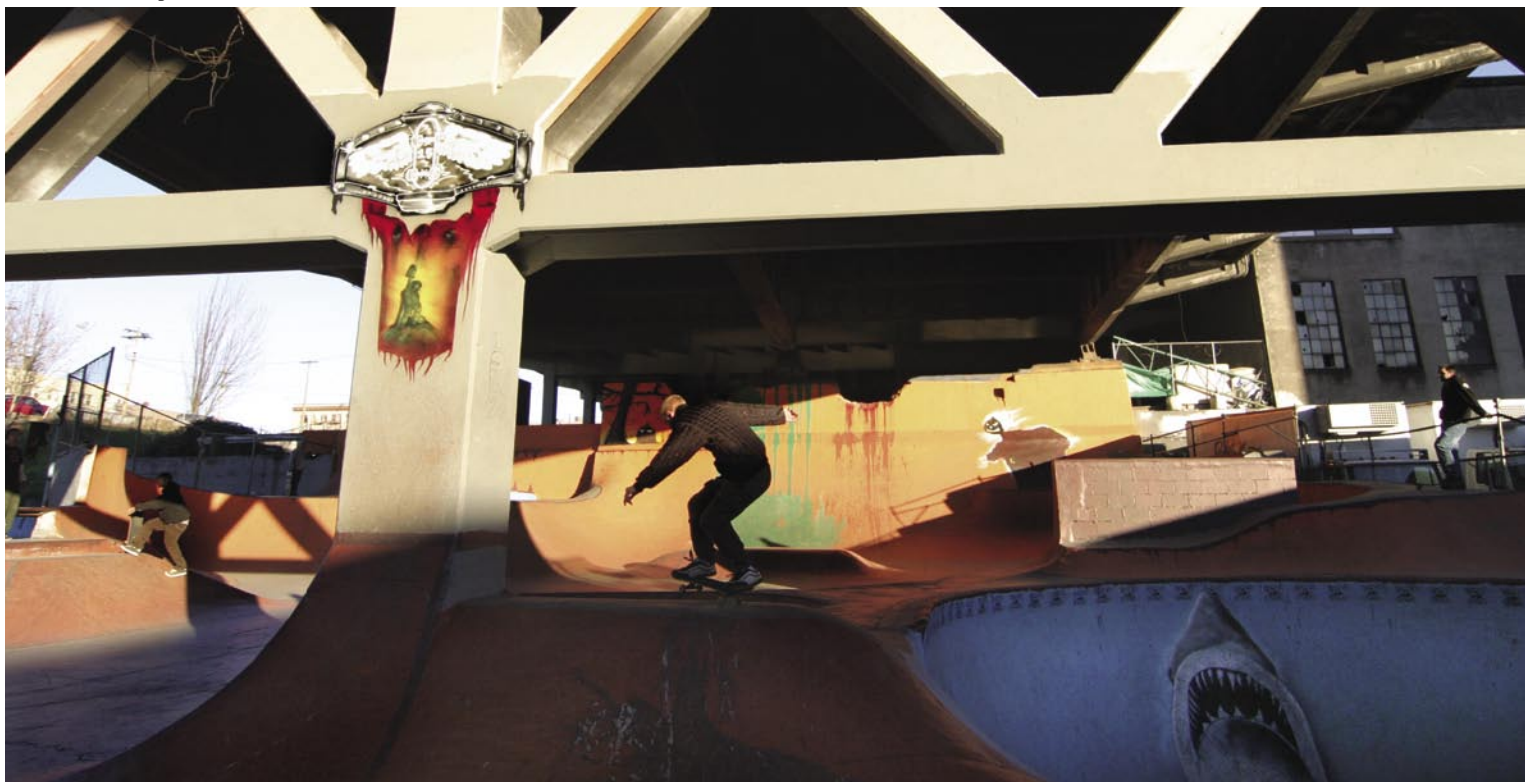
The finalized list is considered a huge victory for skateboarders, many of whom have been pressuring city hall for skateparks for years. But the decision may also be a victory for the relationship between skateboarders and the community. Wojtanik points out that three years of meetings with resistant neighborhood leaders, while not necessarily forging skateboard lovers, has certainly created a new understanding about skaters, and in some neighborhoods, even a desire to build.

"There are a lot of misperceptions about what skateparks are," said Wojtanik. "People who have never been to one have ideas about what they will look and sound like that don't match the reality."

Tom Miller, chief of Staff for Portland City Commissioner Sam Adams and SPLAT member, agrees, but adds that the perceptual shift people are making involves more than just an idea about skateparks. He believes it adds up to a new understanding people have about their own community.

"You've got this paradigm shift in how we recreate," he added. "That's the biggest reason skateparks are gaining in popularity. The community

Burnside Skatepark



When it was completed in 2000, Thrasher Magazine called the Cheahalem Skatepark in Newberg “the best [skatepark] in the world... rated an 11 out of a possible 10. Ten is just not loud enough.” Five years and a lot of parks later, the 30,000 square foot Newberg park is still considered one of the top five skateparks on the planet. The park owes its creation to a petition created by over 200 school-age children and a parks and recreation department willing to try and fulfill their needs. Like Donald, the park was built by Dreamland Skateparks, who tend to skate their parks while building them, allowing them to make changes to the design that resulted in a park skaters say can be ridden all day with hardly a single push. The park sits next to another Newberg feature, a similarly-sized dirt BMX track, and receives hundreds of visitors a day.



Pier

is catching up to the reality of the recreational desires of its members.”

Frank Milborn, who lives two blocks from Glenhaven Park, said that he showed up to the meetings with PP&R certain that a skatepark would bring in stereotypical skatepunks bent on vandalism. But after hearing the presentation, and especially after meeting some skaters, he said he now welcomes the idea of a local skatepark.

“For me, it was seeing the neighborhood kids. I mean, I know these aren’t bad kids, and they were actually going to these meetings asking for a place to practice their sport. I’m still not totally comfortable with it, but I’m willing to let it happen, see how it works out.”

Talking about SPLAT, Miller added, “The stereotypes melt pretty quickly when we show up. We look like everybody else, we sound like everybody else, we know what we’re talking about, and we have the facts.”

THE HISTORY

When skateboards first emerged in California in the 1960s, they were used primarily on sidewalks. Then skaters discovered empty swimming pools, whose rounded bottoms and vertical walls mimicked ocean waves. Most early skateparks, built in the late 1970s, were commercial enterprises charging \$3-\$6 for a two-hour session, and many duplicated the typical California swimming pool precisely, including a rounded overhang and blue tile coping. Other parks, often designed by people with no skateboarding experience, created a skateable terrain that was enjoyable only to skaters of a single skill level, and rarely allowed a skater to move smoothly from one feature to another. Frustrated by cost and these restrictions, skaters turned away from parks to seek challenges in the landscape of the city, and soon a combination of maintenance costs, poor design, and liability concerns shut down skateparks across the country. According *The Insurance*

Journal, by the mid-1980s virtually every skatepark in the country was closed.

Around this time, street skating emerged. For commercial property owners and pedestrians, street skaters represented an annoying criminal ethic, but skaters and writers such as Iain Borden, English architect and author of *Skateboarding, Space, and The City*, have argued that street skaters are maligned simply because they actively participate with the urban landscape. While most people follow spaces planners have used to organize movement—sidewalks, stairways, streets—skateboarders expanded their use of space beyond the expected, riding boards down handrails, sliding along park benches or curbs, and even riding up the vertical faces of buildings.

By violating the expected uses of local architecture and civic structures, skaters put themselves at odds with those who created and maintained the structures, but they also demonstrated a way to view the space within a city with a fresh eye, unencumbered by the designer’s expectations. Borden wrote, “[Skateboarding] addresses the physical architecture of the modern city, yet responds not with another object but with a dynamic presence.” Putting it more colorfully, the editors of the first issue of *Thrasher*, a magazine dedicated to street skating, offered this quote: “A curb is an obstacle until you grind across it. A wall is but a ledge until you drop off it. A cement bank is a useless slab of concrete until you shred it.”

Despite skaters creating a theoretical basis for their actions, building owners still considered this creative use vandalism, and police were called to enforce non-skating laws, which municipalities passed in abundance. This exposed a flaw in the skaters’ anti-authoritarian stance. Although they may have found more creative uses of municipal and private architecture, they were still temporarily appropriating the structures. Given enough time, they would be forced to move from most locations, creating a constant tension between the



Park Skatepark

skaters, municipalities, and police. Frustrated by this, and tired of getting wet, in 1990 a group of Portland skateboarders decided that if they wanted to have control over skateable terrain, they were going to have to build it themselves.

At the time, the area beneath the eastern span of the Burnside Bridge was populated by homeless, junkies, and prostitutes. Without city approval, but ultimately with the backing of some local businessmen and then-Police Chief Tom Potter, these half-dozen skaters cleaned up stray needles, trash, and human feces, chased away the existing population, and, through donations of concrete and fill, built their own skatepark over the course of several years. Due to limited funds and materials, the Burnside skaters rode finished sections repeatedly before being able to build further. This allowed them to create a park in which each section flowed into its adjacent feature, and to be able to build a park that riders of many levels could use.

When completed, Burnside was hailed as one of the world's finest skateparks. Around the same time, changes in liability regulations allowed municipalities to build skateparks, resulting in a 1990s skatepark building boom around the country. The amateur builders from Burnside went on to start two skatepark construction companies that are responsible for most of the skateparks in the Pacific Northwest. In addition, the existence of Burnside Skatepark turned Portland into a destination town for skaters.

A few years after Burnside skatepark was completed, volunteers from the Oregon National Guard built the Pier Park Skatepark to give St. Johns skateboarders a location other than downtown in which to skate. Poorly designed and unrideable in wet weather, Pier Park is the city's only municipally-maintained skatepark, and is often maligned by local skaters. Although Portland also contains a commercial, indoor park, Burnside remains the city standard within the city, despite being crowded and somewhat intimidating to younger skaters. Also, of course, there is the street.

THE FUTURE

The skateparks that exist in Portland, and most of those built in the surrounding community, are considered transition parks. Their design dates back to the drained pools in the 1960s, and although modern skateparks combine many more features, pool-like bowls remain a staple attribute. In modern skateparks a good skater can transition from one feature to another like a perpetual motion machine, gliding up to a coping ledge, then back down, riding up and over a small mogul and down into a shallow bowl, then up a vertical wall. Transition parks tend to be preferred by older skaters, while younger

skaters prefer street skating. Rather than the flowing, constant movement typical of transition skating, street skating tends to favor a single trick, such as an ollie — jumping with the board “stuck” to the feet — onto a metal handrail, done repeatedly, with the skater often walking back to a starting point.

A survey of 187 local skaters taken by Kent Dahlgren, SPLAT member and head of Skaters for Portland Skateparks, a nonprofit group that helps skaters advocate for parks in their neighborhood, showed an overwhelming preference for street-skating parks among younger skaters, as well as a desire to have the city build fewer transition parks and more streetskating spots, or skate plazas.

The Portland plan allows for the construction of both transition skateparks and streetskating skatespots, which will include the equivalent of existing civic structures such as benches, handrails, or a set of concrete flowerpots, explicitly for the use of skaters. Skatespots also tend to be more parent-friendly, incorporating planters, grass, and trees. They duplicate urban plazas the way transition parks duplicate swimming pools. In addition, they take the relationship between skater and community a step further, since the structure itself is neither foreign nor off-limits to pedestrians.

“I see skateparks going two directions,” said Portland architect and skater Mark Seder. “First, I see parks adding more and more extreme features, like the full pipe at Hailey, Idaho [allowing highly skilled riders to complete a vertical 360]. Second, I see more interaction with the community. Skateplazas are one way, but also, I don't see why a skatepark can't incorporate a retail shop, perhaps under a ramp, or café seating. For example, instead of hiding the skateparks in corners of the city, why not put one right in Pioneer Square?”

While skateboarding may not yet be mainstream enough to be considered a city's primary attraction, it is obvious that skaters have gained legitimacy over the years. Portland's acceptance of skateparks as municipal recreational assets has forced the community to re-evaluate its perception of skaters, so perhaps someday Seder may be right. Perhaps some upcoming generation will consider a day out at the skatepark as commonplace as we consider going to a baseball game. **M**

Steve Wilson is a Portland area freelance writer.

WEST LINN

West Linn began the planning process in 1998 and quickly recognized the need for a skatepark system rather than a single park. Their Parks and Recreation Director, Ken Worcester, says that he ultimately envisions five-to-six skatespots for the town of 24,000. At the moment, the town has two, a large transition park and a small (1900 square foot) skatespot in Robinwood Park. The Tanner Creek Skatepark is a challenging park packed with deep bowls, surrounded by street-skating features such as stairs and ledges. The skatespot is aimed at younger, less skilled skaters, and features a ramp and some grindable ledges and benches. The skatespot is nestled among trees in a pleasant park-setting. The size and setting also make the skatespot parent-friendly.