

Mass: Homogenization/Fragmentation
Can Skateboarding Influence Big Box Design?

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Research Methods Course



OUTLINE:

Introduction: Homogenization (Big-Box) / Fragmentation (Skateboarding)

Body 1. Portland's Bridgehead Project

Body 2. Fundamental difference
-Big Box in City
-Skate Park Community
-PDC and UGB

Body 3. Background on Skateboarding (1950's-present)
-Surfing to Subculture

Body 4. Importance of Skateboarding in Architecture.
-Burnside's Identity as Fragment
-An Architect's Understanding. Case Study 1: Line
-Burnside Form
-Public Space?

Conclusion: Yes, the design of a Big-Box retail would be well served to learn from the culture of skateboarding.
-Spatial Understanding of Boarder Applied.
-Challenge the Public/Private Realm

The city is a producer of two types; Homogenization (sameness) and Fragmentation (difference)! This dichotomy is a balance that must be struck to sustain a city's cultural identity. Homogenization is something epitomized by Big-Box Retail. Low cost, large inventory and global capital fuel rapid growth of companies like Wal-Mart, Home-Depot and IKEA. One could look to the anti-thesis of Homogenization; Fragmentation, in hopes of creating alternative growth types. One phenomenon that is known for breaking away from rules, markets and homogenization is skateboarding. Dependent on the creativity of the individual, a Skateboarders only device is a thirty six inch long, seven ply, piece of lumber custom molded to hold feet two point five inches off the ground, mounted on trucks, attached to wheels. Skateboarding is the Fragment broken away from Homogenized urban types

In Portland, a proposal for Big-Box development has occurred at a site known as Burnside Bridgehead. One important element of this development that will go overlooked is the world famous Burnside Skate Park. In 1990 the Burnside Skate Park was constructed by local youths underneath the Burnside Bridge who wanted a ramp sheltered from the rain. This paper will look at the development of Burnside Bridgehead as a Big Box influenced by skateboarding in a bold way. Will Portland's dichotomy create a new urban condition, where the Fragmented influences the Homogenous?

The Portland Bridgehead project is to be a landmark for Portland's East side. For many years Portland has struggled to define it's inner East side. It is hoped that a catalyst project will fuel growth in both business and housing on the east edge of the Burnside Bridge. The Portland Development Commission (PDC) is now in the process of acquiring land for the development (1). The site is located at a convergence of historical streets: East Burnside Street, Martin Luther

King Jr. Blvd, NE Couch Street and Interstate I-84 are the four boundaries on site edges. Three main blocks will be owned by the PDC in January of 2006. The other three blocks are currently run and operated by light industry on adjacent properties. They will be acquired and phasing will be implemented for the Bridgehead development. The location of the Bridgehead is important, but what may be considered more important is what the proposal consists of!

PDC is requesting a maximum mixed-use project consisting of residential, retail, commercial and business. Bridgehead's other objectives include future light rail development. The design of Bridgehead should be "sensitive" to other neighborhood uses, which include the Burnside Skate Park. The idea is to pull money into the struggling inner East side. In August 2004 a competition was held and three proposals were chosen as finalists for the PDC to choose from. Gerding Edlen Development along with Opus NW had programs that included "Big-Box" development schemes. Gerding Edlen wanted a Home Depot and the Opus Model included a Loews. The third team, Beam was proposing a small-business incubator to generate local growth.

Currently, the city is allowing revamped proposals from Opus NW and Beam that no longer include big boxes after numerous rejections by vocal small business and skater communities. Town meetings held throughout the years of 04'/05' had shown that the public was not interested in supporting "Big-Box" and the effects of Mass Homogenization. Local companies like Winks Hardware and Hippo Hardware were estimated conservatively to see at least a 6% drop in sales. The two most vocal crowds to question the proposals for "Big-Box" were local small business owners and skaters. Not only were the skaters trying to protect what they hold so dear (Burnside Skate Park located under the Burnside Bridge) but also they did it in a sophisticated and civic-minded manner. They attended town meetings held by the PDC and voiced their opinion about large retailers like Loews and Home Depot. While the direct goal was to make sure nothing happened to the world famous skate park, don't be mistaken; skateboarders know the power of Mass Homogenization.

Big Box retail relies on economic, physical and social dominance. Traditionally, Big-Box phenomena have occurred on the edge of Portland near the Urban Growth Boundary (UGB). A more recent phenomenon is companies like Wal-Mart, Home Depot and IKEA moving into city centers (two proposals in Portland over the last year). The desire to provide these services in the city would undoubtedly be met with high use. With relatively high urban density created by the UGB, Portland has a lot of potential dollars to be spent at a large-scale retailer. Is that right? Is the fate of the city to rely on large-scale retail?

Local companies like Hippo, Winks, Wood Crafters and The Rebuilding Center provide unique services in the inner East side, zoned "light industry." In a hypothetical urban area, where these companies wouldn't die if a Big Box moved in, the city might actually be better served to allow large-scale retail. Fragmentation can only occur out of Homogenization! It is the dichotomy that gives Portland richness. At the opposite end of "Big-Box" is skateboarding. This counter culture didn't seek to homogenize when creating the Burnside Skate Park, they just wanted a place to skate.

Mass Homogenization mainly occurs in urban environments. It is dependent on a population willing to be sold the same products, read the same newspapers and ride the same bus to work. These services all offer choices and the citizen makes a decision on what to use or reject. Architects, Urban Planners, police and commercial interests all work to create a smooth economic and civic environment conducive to choices which support varying urban functions. Skaters move through the city with eyes open for police, looking to interact with space in new ways. A Skater is dependent on being the fragment, which challenges the normative. While Mass Homogenization occurs in mainstream culture, skateboarding is fueled by radical counter culture. It must be understood that skateboarding is an art/sport. Spatial, physical, playful, the skateboarder interacts with space in their own way. A simple vessel of wood supported by Metal and Plastic, the skateboard challenges urbanity.

Skateboarding grew out of surfing in the 1950's (2). The idea was to simulate surfing when the ocean had bad waves. The invention of the Clay wheel in the late 1950's made motion on pavement more enjoyable. Skateboarding had early roots in the rebel cause around 1965 with films, magazines and newspapers all documenting the growing phenomena as a laid back, counter productive movement. The scene in those days was decidedly 'surfer driven.' Long blond hair and sunset t-shirts was the demographic for the young skater.

In 1973 Frank Nasworthy created the urethane wheel. This allowed skaters to reach higher speeds with greater control. To coincide with this tradition, skateboard decks and trucks also took on new shapes to accommodate new moves and speeds. These material shifts marked new possibilities for spatial interaction.

Through the 1970's one group of skaters epitomized the skate movement in skateboarding. The Z-Boys were a skating crew based off of Pacific Ocean Pier in southern California. They had a youthfully rebellious edge. Skaters like Stacy Perelta and Tony Alva influenced youths who wanted to go faster and higher more frequently. Part of the growth of skating during the mid 70's was the spatial discovery of vert riding. Vert riding is riding on a surface vertical from the ground plan. This discovery occurred in drained swimming pools. The curve of a kidney bean pool goes from flat bottom to vertical and allows the skater to move on walls. The wall-ride can only occur because improved skateboard design. The Z-Boys were one of the first crews riding vertical and catching air.

The 1980's for skateboarding consisted of a death and rebirth of the sport/art. Due to high numbers of young skaters getting injured, cities had to close down their skate parks through the late 70's and early 80's. Lawsuits, broken arms and angry parents wanted the sport/art stopped. While the removal of the parks was bad in the short term, it became good for the sport in the long run.

'THRASHER' Magazine was introduced in 1980 as a sort of cult icon that saved skateboarding. The publication linked a punk theme with art and skateboarding. The Photozine

movement brought images and skaters together under one context, non-conformity. THRASHER embraced the collective desire to have a place and way to foster skate culture. No more ramps to skate, and youths across the nation began picking up boards and heading 'underground' culturally and formally.

One place that epitomizes this 'underground' Fragment feel is Burnside Skate Park. Skaters from Portland, fed up with no place to skate, sought out a site underneath the Burnside Bridge (3). From the year 1988 to 1992 the skaters would build the park cooperatively while simultaneously pushing out crime like drugs, prostitution and violence. Through support from local business, skaters got Burnside Skate Park's land given to them by then Mayor Bud Clark. The park is the result of skaters working hard to create a place for their art/sport which actually cleans up the city and gives the inner East side a sense of place. The Burnside Project is now world famous. In a film by OPB called "Full Tilt Boogie" skater Kent Dahlgren explains that today, if Burnside Skate park is mentioned, skaters from all over the world will say- "Burnside, Jesus, that place is gnarly!" (4) The Homogenized city rejected these skaters (Skateboarding was illegal on city streets in Portland until January 2001) and forced them to become a Fragment. The Burnside Bridgehead is now up for development and the project borders on the skatepark. Is it possible for skateboarding to influence the design of this project in a way more spatially/culturally rooted in skateboarding?

Iain Borden, Dean of the Bartlett School offers his thoughts. "Movement of the body across urban space, and in its direct interaction with the modern architecture of the city, lies the central critique of skateboarding – a rejection both of the values and of the spatio-temporal modes of living in the contemporary capitalist city." (5) Skateboarding may be the most totalizing urban sculpture; Spatial, Emotional, Political and Architectural.

The design connotations of the word Fragment imply a break from the normative. This break could generate a design response. Skateboarding in and of itself has no need to be a

Fragment. The modern society from which it stems does not feel it a productive member of a Capitalist Machine. Though shunned by the masses, skateboarders explore space in terms of Architecture. Traditional architectural/design concepts like void, transition, zone, transfer, movement and line all have very specific understandings in both Architecture and Skateboarding. Skateboarding- as a fragment- has a keen eye for space.

The term “Line” in Skateboarding is a form of spatial understanding. This is a fragmentary understanding of the word “line” as understood by Architects and Planners. A skaters “line” links hyper-specific spatial elements (benches, planters, steps, gaps, walls) conducive to skateboarding tricks and maneuvers along one continuous path. The Architect or planner use lines to complete compositions of a larger nature (complete drawings). To the Architect, the line is supplemental. To skaters the line is the composition, always shifting and changing based on desire and freedom. The goal of a skater’s line is to spatially link tricks through an urban setting while maintaining fluidity. For instance, skateboarders riding in Portland’s Lovejoy Park follow a line that links two planter boxes with two flights of three stair sets. This line will allow a skateboarder to link architectural elements to the board in use creating a composition. Two skaters are discussing varying ways to match moves from their individual book of tricks to the Lovejoy planter boxes. (6) Skateboarders have a certain freedom with respect to Architecture and public space. In the same way Architects design buildings, Skaters design “lines.”

Skateboarders exist as a Fragment of society still. The city of Portland has granted skateboarding official status as a legal mode of transportation. More importantly is the understanding that skateboarding will remain a fragment until cities allow skateboarding back into public squares and the public realm. Skaters have a unique sense of spatial understanding. The Burnside Skate Park marks a point in the city, where that spatial understanding intersects with civic reclamation of ‘public space.’ Skaters for Portland Skate Parks says “Consider that skateboarding today, with 16 million enthusiasts nationwide, is more popular than baseball for

kids ages 6-17. Portland offers 193 municipally supported baseball fields and only one skate park.” (7) Information like this will force skaters onto private property or make them engage in social actions like creating the Burnside Skate Park. Burnside Skate Park is a beautiful response to a poor existing condition. In terms of Architecture, Burnside Skate Park is Disney at a grassroots level. Burnside is roughly 1200 square feet; has two pools, one half-pipe, one spine ramp and about fifteen site-specific features. Some actually become additive footings integrated into columns for the bridge itself. Burnside throws off the object-space-object-space rhythm of modern Architecture by creating one continuous fluid surface for play.

All types of people activate Burnside Skate Park for roughly 10 hours a day. Skaters from the age of 7 to 45 frequent the park. The project is universally symbolic for the struggle to keep “public space” as actually “public.” Skateboarding and the history of Burnside Skate Park reveal that the city and public space isn’t an arena for everyone to use. Skateboarders appropriate space because they aren’t allowed any other way. Burnside presently is a cathedral for skaters, but it wouldn’t hurt for architects to see the form and space relations created underneath the Burnside Bridge.

While land was donated by Portland, to the skaters, the fragmentary nature of skating is still the sport/arts legacy! History in Portland has shown that Skateboarding is sustainable in urban environments where allowed. Reduction of crime and an increase in small local businesses has occurred since Burnside’s creation. Why is it Portland’s cultural sport/art it pushed under the Burnside Bridge, while Big-Box is allowed to showcase itself at the Bridgehead site?

It is my belief that the skateboarding movement can fuel a design response for a proposal at the Burnside Bridgehead. I propose to use spatial ideas derived from skateboarding. (Line, Gap, rhythm, hip, spine, flow, etc.) Spatial concepts combined with a skater’s unique understanding as the “Fragment” banished from the public spaces will create a language which shatters the Homogenizing effect of Big Box retail. The space will be a scaled, fluid response. Designed with the intention of giving the East Side Industrial Zone an identity truly it’s own. A

truly spatial recognition known by Skaters, but not by Big-Box. This dichotic relationship will foster new growth patterns on the inner East side- Fueled by the energy already existing under the Burnside Bridge.

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Endnotes information: Facts derived from general history of skateboarding in Beautiful Losers. National Sporting Goods Associations info is attainable on-line. Methods included visits to Lovejoy Park near Portland Center Apartments in SW Downtown Portland (4th and College), Bridgehead Site and Burnside Skate Park (Burnside ST. and MLK Jr. Blvd.) Majority of Bridgehead information gathered online. Grassroots protests of big box conducted online.

1. PDC Development Plan Packet. Free online PDF page 1..
2. Beautiful Losers. (pg.111)
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4. Full Tilt Boogie. Quoted from skater.
5. <http://www.nottingham.ac.uk/3cities/borden.htm>
6. Visit to SW Lovejoy Park. Nov. 10 @ 4:00pm.
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