

KICK, PUSH, COAST: AN ETHNOGRAPHIC EXPLORATION OF PULASKI PARK

by

Janis Woodward
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DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to Timothy, who taught me how to ollie, and all the skaters at Pulaski Park out there grinding, legally and illegally.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

Black Lives Matter.....	BLM
District of Columbia	DC
District of Columbia, Maryland, Virginia.....	DMV
Department of Transportation.....	DOT
International Association of Skateboard Companies.....	IASC
Intergenerational Contact Zone.....	ICZ
Martin Luther King.....	MLK
National Park Service	NPS
Temporary Protected Status.....	TPS
United States	US

ABSTRACT

KICK, PUSH, COAST: AN ETHNOGRAPHIC EXPLORATION OF PULASKI PARK

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George Mason University, 2022

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Considered one of the most popular skate spots in the world, Pulaski Park (formally referred to as Freedom Plaza) has been a beloved place for skateboarders since the late 1980s. Although skaters from around the United States come to skate this spot, skateboarding in the plaza is illegal. This has led to increased policing and surveillance of skateboarders and a burgeoning fear that the plaza will eventually undergo redevelopment to completely eradicate skateboarding. The potential eradication of street skateboarding could then lead to the disintegration of the skateboarding community that has frequented the plaza for over thirty years. Drawing from fieldwork conducted between April and August 2021, this thesis provides an ethnographic exploration of the complexities of skate spots like Pulaski Park. Through an analysis of street skateboarding at Pulaski, I highlight the infrastructural, intergenerational, and corporeal patterns that emerge in historical street skating spaces. By highlighting these intricacies, I call for urban planners and policymakers to recognize the significance of the Pulaski

skateboarding community and how it contributes to the liveliness of the city. This thesis also contributes to literature on the city, urban space, politics, and intergenerationality and aging by bringing the multidimensions of street skateboarding into these conversations.

INTRODUCTION: THE ART OF EMPTY SWIMMING POOLS

Sweat dripped down my forehead as I kicked and pushed my way towards a group of people gathered around to spectate the exciting happenings in the city that day. As I got closer, I could hear the intermittent “oohs” and “ahhs” of a rambunctious crowd. Even closer, I could hear the sound of skateboard wheels hitting the ground. It was June 21st, 2021, and people from all over the East Coast had gathered at Freedom Plaza in Washington, D.C., also known as Pulaski Park to skateboarders, to participate in the annual National Go Skateboarding Day. I was kicking and pushing on my skateboard towards the crowd. The hot sun beamed down as skateboarders performed various tricks in front of huge mobs of observers, consisting of both skaters and non-skaters.

National Skateboarding Day was first devised in 2004 by the International Association of Skateboard Companies (IASC) in an effort to extend the reach of skateboarding to wider audiences and encourage them to skateboard (York 2019). Since then, skaters in cities all around the world come together every June 21st to commemorate skateboarding. In 2021, at Pulaski Park, the theme for National Go Skate Day was “Push for Freedom.” In support of the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement, the skaters traversed on their boards or “pushed” from Malcolm X Park, also known as Meridian Hill Park, to Pulaski to raise awareness of the rising tensions and increasing injustices Black Americans face in the US. I had been conducting fieldwork on street skateboarding at the

plaza since April 2021 and had never seen that many skateboarders there before. I already learned this on my previous trips to Pulaski but was reminded again just how valuable this site was.

Many scholars of urban studies, anthropology, and sociology have written extensively about skateboarding. They argue that street skateboarding, in particular, is a helpful mechanism to explore topics including skate subculture dynamics, youth mobilities, and the contested use and governance of public spaces (Beal et al. 2017; Carr 2010; Chiu 2009; Howell 2001; Németh 2006; Woolley and Johns 2001). These studies often use significant skate spots in cities as a backdrop to highlight the aforementioned issues. Throughout this thesis, I undoubtedly partake in this as well, but where I depart from other scholars is that instead of solely using Pulaski Park as a mechanism to examine these larger issues, Pulaski Park is a main character in this story. I explore street skateboarding through the “eyes” of Pulaski Park, a significant skate spot and shared place of meaning that gets animated by the skateboarders who traverse the plaza. Simultaneously, the park itself animates skateboarders’ everyday skate practices and livelihoods. To become better acquainted with this character, I present some of the intricacies of Pulaski Park and the skateboarders who frequent the spot in the following chapters. Before doing so, I will provide a brief history of skateboarding, present a review of the scholarly literature that guides this thesis, and discuss my research methods.

The Evolution of Skateboarding: Past, Present, Future

Skateboarding is frequently described as a highly creative, democratic, and participant-driven sport or art form. Unlike other organized sports, anyone with a skateboard can partake in the activity anywhere and at any time. It is also described as rebellious, anti-authoritative, and at times exclusive. One central characteristic of street skateboarding, however, is the freedom it brings to reappropriate and reimagine urban space and architecture to establish new skating terrains, despite skate regulations or law enforcement (Borden 2019). This ability to imagine space anew is what brings skateboarders to empty swimming pools, concrete full-pipes meant for water infrastructure projects, and city plazas. During the years 1976 and 1977, California experienced one of its most severe droughts, which prompted swimming pool owners in Southern California to drain their pools (Stansbury 2016) as part of various state conservation efforts. While the image of drained swimming pools in the summertime is quite somber, to a young group of skateboarders called the “Z-Boys,” this empty space was an opportunity—one to expand the boundaries of skateboarding. The Z-Boys took to skating these empty swimming pools, riding and flipping against and within these previously water-filled concrete structures. A creative, daring, yet illegal idea to skate a swimming pool helped contribute to the genesis of the aerial tricks and vertical skating that is a prominent feature of skateboarding today. It also showcases one of many ingenious ways skateboarders continue to use spaces and architectural designs that are not typically designated for them. Since then, skateboarding has continued to evolve, growing with the ever-changing urban landscape it finds itself within.

Skateboarding was first popularized in the 1960s and 70s by Californian skate groups such as the Z-Boys, who took surfer moves from the waves to the streets. They played a huge role in laying the groundwork for what mainstream skateboarding is today. Their pool-riding helped popularize vertical or vert skating, which is skateboarding done on built vertical ramps and half pipes. From the 1950s onwards, and exacerbated by the Z-Boys, a skateboarding industry emerged consisting of competitions, skateboarding companies, and skateboard manufacturing. However, skateboarding took a dive in the 1980s and many skateparks on the West Coast began to shut down (Snyder 2018). On the opposite side of the US, where empty swimming pools and parks with half pipes lacked, skaters used found space and architecture in the city to evolve street skateboarding.

In the 2008 documentary *Deathbowl to Downtown*, filmmakers Rick Charnoski and Coan Nichols explore the evolution of skateboarding in New York City and examine how Manhattan's changing landscape and redevelopment projects from the 1980s-90s birthed a new kind of skating and skateboard culture. With the closure of almost all skateparks in the 1980s, there was a shift away from vert skating to what skate ethnographer George Snyder calls the "democratic impulse" of street skating, which could be done anywhere (2018). In New York City, skaters no longer needed to trespass someone's empty swimming pool or rely on a manufactured skatepark. Rather, the developing and redeveloping concrete jungle that is New York City was already manufactured for the skater's use, and more importantly, anyone with a skateboard could do it. As the film notes, "Ramps were out, artifacts of urban landscape in" (2008). More specifically, skaters were drawn to vast plazas surrounding federal and financial

institutions, since they often met the requirements of a good skate spot: ledges, stairs, curbs, and smooth flat ground. The narrator in the film states, “It was like skaters had a mole in the city planning office” (2008). The forms of architecture that spawned from these redevelopment projects also contributed to the different ways skateboarders used the space; street skateboarding was a symptom of these projects and a laboratory for experimentation. Thus, street skateboarding as it is still known today was conceived. The current emphasis in street skateboarding today is on how skaters can utilize urban furniture in innovative ways, including higher jumps and harder pops over unique architectural designs.

As skateboarding evolved from parks to urban streets, the places many chose to carry out their craft became spaces of friction. This friction occurred between skateboarders and business owners, law enforcement, or pedestrians, which resulted in street skateboarding becoming a highly policed activity in public spaces. One result of this friction-filled space was the advent of “Skatestoppers” in the late 1990s, which are metal rods that can be implemented on ledges, handrails, and benches. Chris Loarie designed this product to prevent skaters from grinding, as in the sliding of skateboard trucks on ledges, walls, and other architectural elements (Kelly 2020). Loarie trademarked the name, Skatestoppers and built a business out of deterring skateboarding. These are widely implemented on ledges at college campuses, shopping centers, and public plazas as structural forms of deterrence. Such Skatestoppers and other skate deterrents are classified as forms of defensive design or hostile architecture. Emerging literature suggests that these intentional design strategies are utilized to “guide or restrict

behavior in urban space” (Chellew 2019), especially communities such as skateboarders. Along with skate deterrents, street skateboarding is also illegal in many public urban areas and plazas. The illegality and deterrence of skateboarding has led to increased stereotypes of skateboarders as deviant, rebellious youth and they are often depicted as such in various news media. Moreover, to combat street skateboarders’ protests and indignations, city planners and urban designers implement skate parks on the edges of cities to deter them from skating in such public spaces, further ostracizing them from and invalidating their belongingness in public life. However, this restricts and separates street skaters from the heart, diversity, and creativity of city centers.

While skateboarding is often seen as deviant and transgressive, it is also a billion-dollar market, bringing in 1.96 billion USD in 2018 alone (Miller 2021). It is mainstreamed through large sporting events like the X Games and just recently, the 2020 Tokyo Olympics. “Street skateboarding” was one of the featured events at the Olympics, and skaters were tasked with skating on manufactured replicas of city spaces. More recently, there has been an increase in skateboard sales since the COVID-19 pandemic 2020 lockdown (Miller 2021). People picked up skateboarding because it was an activity that could be done outside and alone.

The popularity and innovations achieved in skateboarding tend to ebb and flow throughout time. With popularized events like the Olympics and the spread of skateboarding like wild-fire through social media, the future of skateboarding is wide open. On the future of skateboarding, Mark “Gonz” Gonzales, often cited as one of the most influential skateboarders (Hendrikx 2016), says,

When I was younger, there were only a small handful of people who were dictating where skateboarding was going. Now, there are so many skaters and it's going in so many different directions. It's so cool to wonder what's going to happen next because everybody is doing different stuff. They're combining things and ideas – it's very exciting times.

With all these different directions to choose from, I follow the direction of street skateboarders at Pulaski Park. The purpose of this thesis is threefold. One, to present a holistic depiction of the complexities that emerge at historical skate spots like Pulaski; two, to understand the complex entanglements between street skateboarding and city spaces, including its conjunctions and disjunctions with governance and urban design; and three, and maybe most significantly, to urge for the recognition of Pulaski Park as a site of cultural, social, and historical significance for skateboarders, from generations past to generations forward.

Review of the Literature

This thesis is inspired by and draws heavily on the scholarly work produced by numerous urban anthropologists, sociologists, and ethnographers. The theoretical threads that run throughout deal with concepts of space and mobility, urban governance, belonging, and intergenerationality. I also engage with complex definitions of the city and how they might resonate with street skateboarding. Scholarly research on street skateboarding tends to overlap with multiple urban studies topics, and I will discuss this interwovenness below.

The City

My research took place in Washington, D.C., the Capital of the United States. The city's history enmeshes with street skateboarding in a multiplicity of ways, specifically at

Pulaski Park. To help contextualize my analysis of Pulaski, it is imperative to first understand what cities are and how they are conceptualized. Although cities may conjure up popular imagery of skyscrapers and swarms of bustling people, not one city is exactly the same and thus, “the city” itself becomes difficult to clearly define. In the following sections, I explore ways the city can function as a stage, a market, and a sponge.

The City as a Stage. Many scholars build their conceptualizations of and about the city from Henri Lefebvre’s seminal texts such as, *The Production of Space* and *The Right to the City*. Such scholars explore the spatial powers of the city and how it often functions as a stage that can display the theatrics of everyday life (Brenner 2017; Merrifield 2017; Minton 2017). In line with the theatre, the city can become a place for one to *perform* cultural and social identities and also receive criticism of these performed identities. As Hawkins writes, “the city functions not only as a center of cultural activity but as the stage on which identities performed and from which they faced critical evaluation” (2015, 157). Similarly, in skateboarding discourse, the city is regularly described as a playground for skateboarders to socially interact with one another and physically interact with the urban terrain (Woolley and Johns 2001). For skateboarders, the city becomes a space for play and artistic expression; the spots they choose to skate act as makeshift stages to perform their tricks, mainly in front of an audience including other skaters, tourists, and random passersby. In this analysis, I observe Pulaski Park as the stage for street skateboarders to take part in performance and play.

Commodifying the City. As cities become significant sites of cultural production, the everyday practices and mechanisms of city life lend themselves to commodification.

As such, certain scholars conceptualize the city based on its relation to political economy and capitalism (Graeber 2009; Harvey 2013). They note that market fundamentalism and neoliberal ethics classify the city as a place to exchange commodities and expand profit margins. Reiterating this, scholars Simon Irvine and Sophie Taysom define the city as “a conceptual and physical space that organises and is simultaneously (re)constructed by the system of consumption” (1998, 23). With this definition of the city in mind, they argue that “skateboarding is one practice which can be seen to disrupt the consumptive logic of the city” (1998, 25). Many skaters disregard the city as simply a space to exchange commodities, and instead view it in terms of physics and architectural objects to perform on. Despite this, skaters are not completely disconnected from capitalist consumption. Professional skateboarders dawn logos on their shirts and shoes, as they get sponsored by large clothing brands like Nike or Vans. The X Games and other extreme sporting events that include skateboarding bring in large audiences and larger revenues. Skateboarders also participate in reproducing fashion aesthetics. The popular skateboard magazine and brand, *Thrasher Magazine*, for example, sells t-shirts that used to be worn mainly by skateboarders. Now, the brand and logo have become popularized among non-skaters. What was once only part of skate culture has become embedded in the mass consumption of everyday streetwear. Thus, the city is a place in which the commodities (brands, clothing, shoes, etc.) that skateboarders wear become advertised to other skateboarders and non-skaters. I align my analysis with Irvine and Taysom (1998) and explore the ways street skateboarders at Pulaski are able to operate outside of corporate consumptive practices and take part in local, community-based consumptive logics.

Moreover, the gentrification of cities relates to the commodification of culture and identity. This is evident in Brandi Thompson Summers' research on the gentrification of H Street in Washington, D.C. She writes, "On H Street you can partake in the pleasures of visible and edible ethnicity as a form of aestheticized difference – a politics that are provisional, variable, and a distinct move away from the homogeneous and monolithic" (Thompson Summers 2021, 118). She describes how the cultural experiences of Black Americans and the idea of Blackness get repackaged and commodified to become more marketable in gentrified city spaces in Washington, D.C. Similarly, aspects of street skateboarding become marketable and commodifiable. Professional skateboarders who participate in organized games are legitimized through their ability to produce profit, while non-professional or non-sponsored street skateboarders do not reap the benefits of their art and live highly policed lives.

*The City as a Sponge.*¹ The city is not impenetrable but malleable, transient, and absorbent. More critically, social scientist and geographer Doreen Massey warns of the problematic viewpoint of the city as a single, distinguishable entity (2015). Rather, the city and cities should be thought about in terms of spatial configurations and complex phenomena transcending geographical locations, both physical and imaginary. As such, cities have the ability to absorb the social and cultural phenomena that occur within them. Irvine and Taysom agree with this definition but make clear the importance of recognizing the city's very real physical environment and note how the physical and

¹ This is not to be confused with the "sponge city," which is an urban construction model centered around water infrastructure. It is neither used in the way that some urban geographers use the notion of the "sponge city" (Argent, Rolley, and Walmsley 2008). It is rather about how cities and their urban infrastructure can absorb different cultures and become transformed by them.

architectural layout of a city greatly informs the conceptual nature of the city (1998). It is essential to recognize both the conceptual and physical characteristics of the city when discussing street skateboarding.

Conceptually, many scholars note how street skateboarding raises concerns about who has the right to the city and in what ways (Németh 2006). In particular, the literature conveys how skaters often negotiate and renegotiate how cities are used and by whom. In another instance, the physical layout and urban architectural designs already in place guide skateboarders and contribute to skateboarding's evolution. In *Rebel Cities: From the Right to the City to the Urban Revolution*, David Harvey ponders urban sociologist Robert Park's definition of the city, in which he claims that it is:

. . .man's most consistent and on the whole, his most successful attempt to remake the world he lives in more after his heart's desire. But if the city is the world which man created, it is the world in which he is henceforth condemned to live. Thus, indirectly, and without any clear sense of the nature of his task, in making the city man has remade himself. (2013, 4)

Park, then, suggests that the making of the city is never complete. Rather, people have continuous agentic power over how the city transforms and can replenish cities with their desires. Like a sponge that soaks up water and also gets wrung out, cities are made and remade depending on the ways people use them. Here, I find Park's definition to be most apt in relation to how street skateboarders activate space and transform the city. Harvey builds on Park's definition by noting there is collective agentic power in the making of a city, "The freedom to make and remake ourselves and our cities is. . .one of the most precious yet most neglected of our human rights. How best then to exercise that

right?” (2013, 4). Harvey’s question can be answered using two words: street skateboarding.

In *Skateboarding and the City: A Complete History*, Iain Borden offers a succinct examination of the urban politics of skateboarding and its multifaceted relationship with the city. He writes: “skateboarding is nothing less than a sensual, physical and emotional desire for one’s own body in motion, and to engage with architecture and other people; skateboarding is a crash and rebirth of self, body and terrain” (2019). Here, again, we see the potential in skateboarding for one’s desires to become actualized in and among urban architecture and terrain. From empty swimming pools to industrial pipes in remote locations, the terrain for street skateboarding has constantly shifted throughout skate history based on its ability to absorb the desires of skateboarders. The city and its terrain act as a sponge, absorbing the people and cultures that fill it with lively intensity. Particularly, I note that this is the case with street skateboarding at Pulaski Park. Although it can be argued that various actors, other than skateboarders, already become absorbed in the city and impact it in different ways through street art, political protest, and even guerilla gardening, the way that street skateboarders perceive urban space and reimagine the physical landscape of cities permeates the sponge-like nature of cities. By activating liminal spaces that often go unnoticed and untouched within the busy urban spectacle, street skateboarders saturate the city with liveliness. From the city, I move outwards conceptually to notions of urban politics and intergenerationality.

Urban Studies and Governance

Urban studies is a vast area of research that engages explicitly with questions of how social life is structured by and experienced within urban contexts. Urban anthropology, although having a long history with city-based research since the 1930s (Redfield 1942; Wirth 1928), was not a formalized field until the 1960s. Since then, it has undergone multiple theoretical turns. More recently, with the rise of globalizing processes and urbanization, urban scholars and anthropologists have tackled diverse topics and themes such as, transnationalism and globalization (Guest 2003; Vora 2013), the politics of urban design (Chellew 2019; Ménoret 2014; Vivoni 2009), and space, place, and mobility (Caldeira 2012; Jackson 2012; Lefebvre 1991; Low 1996; Massey 1994). In particular, the analysis of space and mobility in urban contexts has illustrated the changing social, cultural, and political dimensions of urban life. Urban scholars conceptualize space as not merely physical but rather “constructed out of social relations” (Massey 1994). Urban areas are not only spaces where street skateboarders can physically dwell but also areas where they can create social meaning (Chiu 2009; Németh 2006; Woolley and Johns 2001).

Stemming from this, another prominent topic in urban studies is the politics of urban design. Some anthropologists emphasize the importance of infrastructure in shaping and reshaping the sociality and politics of everyday life (Larkin 2013; Nucho 2016; Simone 2004). An analysis of youth street skaters’ interactions with urban design builds upon Pierre Bourdieu’s (1970) discussions of house infrastructure and spatial design, which he deems are reflections of societal structures. In other words, the way

spaces are constructed reveals the social dynamics between people within the city (Jaffe and de Koning 2015) and reflects differing habitus or social, political, and economic perceptions of urban spaces. Due to the interest in space, politics, mobility, and infrastructure, skateboarding has not escaped the purview of many urban ethnographers (Borden 2001; Chiu 2009; Woolley, Hazelwood, and Simkins 2011). Many of these studies explore the junctions between skateboarding, space, and conformity.

Social scientific research on urban governance stems from ideas of power, governmentality, and neoliberalism (Ferguson and Gupta 2002; Foucault 1991, 1995; Scott 1998). Experts in this field have demonstrated how the power of the state and other forms of governance dictate and structure people's bodies and lives (Foucault 1991, 1995; Scott 1998). One notable study by Beal et al. (2017) utilizes case studies from skateboarding in three different skate parks to illustrate how US neoliberal conditions shift normative skateboarding practices and produce multiple actors beyond the skaters themselves (11). Anthropologist Pascal Ménoret's (2014) ethnographic work on joyriding² in Saudi Arabia further illustrates the disjuncture between authority, public space, and youth communities. Ménoret discusses the implications of larger political and economic structures on the everyday practices of Saudi Arabian youth and how youth can combat these dominant forces through activities such as joyriding. As Ménoret notes, joyriding is a way for the marginalized youth of Saudi Arabia to confront and contest the state (2014). In a similar vein, due to Pulaski Park's proximity to US government

² Joyriding is the act of stealing cars and driving them fast and dangerously, including, but not limited to, drifting and skidding (Ménoret 2014).

buildings, skateboarders at the plaza are capable of confronting the state and opposing those who hold governmental power. Additionally, the rampant policing and deterrence of street skateboarding calls into question what the state deems policeable and delegitimized in public spaces.

Intergenerationality

Due to increasing aging populations, there has been a surge in scholarly discourse on aging in anthropology and gerontology. These discourses are often centered around aging subjectivities, formal and informal care, notions of “successful” and “healthy” aging, and much more (Cohen 1998; Kavedzija and Lamb 2020; Wentzell 2021, 2020; Zhang 2020). The concept of intergenerationality has also entered discourses on aging, as intergenerational gaps continue to widen. Here, I will explore the varying literature on aging and intergenerationality.

Many studies explore the importance of intergenerational relationships and how they can benefit future generations (Alanen 2014; Biggs and Carr 2015; Kernan and Cortellesi 2016; Yan 2016). In particular, Kernan and Cortellesi (2016) note how intergenerational environments can foster greater learning among youths and social solidarity between generations. The study examines intergenerational learning in both formal and in-formal settings to determine how these relationships lead to transformations of identity and culture. They conclude that attention “needs to be paid to the non-physical aspects of urban living, including the design of learning spaces, in order to have even a greater impact on solidarity and cohesion” (2016, 114). These “non-physical aspects” include playfulness, humor, and the ability to create with each other.

Other intergenerational scholars explore intergenerationality in tandem with mobility. These mobilities take shape in different physical, technological, social, or cultural ways (Murray and Robertson 2016). For example, Sayago, Righi, and Möller Ferreira (2016) note how internet and computer communications allowed for more intergenerational connections; older generations who are mobile (moving around, traveling, etc.) were able to use technology to better connect with their grandchildren. Understanding intergenerationality in these varying contexts allows scholars and researchers to better understand how to strengthen and promote intergenerational connections.

Whereas the scholars mentioned above focus on the non-physical aspects needed to foster intergenerational cohesion, there is now research regarding the environment, including physically built spaces in public urban areas that may lead to intergenerational contact (Kaplan et al. 2020). In *Intergenerational Contact Zones: Place-based Strategies for Promoting Social Inclusion and Belonging*, Kaplan et al. use the term “intergenerational contact zone (ICZ),” which they define as “spatial focal points for different generations to meet, interact, build relationships (e.g., trust and friendships), and, if desired, work together to address issues of local concern” (2020, 3). The edited works in this book explore how urban design can create these ICZs; they look at how designs and urban settings/terrain, whether it be bus stops, rooftops, or city streets, can generate strong intergenerational social ties. The ultimate goal of this scholarly research is to highlight “the spatial dimension present in any intergenerational endeavor” (2). With all this research on intergenerationality, space, and place, the lack of focus on street skateboarding is striking. Street skateboarding can be one of the most multigenerational

practices, and by the very nature of it, it brings generations together in one public space. In Chapter 2 of this thesis, I examine the intergenerational relationships that emerge at Pulaski Park to argue that street skateboarding in public spaces is a legitimate way, if not the best way, to cultivate positive intergenerational cohesion. Due to the increase in aging populations and intergenerational gaps in the US, intergenerational solidarity is vital to help combat ageism and disconnection or intolerance between generations.

Research Methods

From April to August 2021, research for this project took place at Pulaski Park (formally referred to as Freedom Plaza). Pulaski is a public plaza located in Northwest Washington, D.C., at the corner of 14th Street and Pennsylvania Avenue. Due to the architectural layout, including its granite and marble-laden infrastructure, it is widely regarded as a historically significant skate spot for street skateboarders all across the US. Since its construction in the 1980s, skateboarding has remained a prominent feature of the plaza. However, the plaza is administered by the National Park Service (NPS), which declared it illegal to skateboard in the area. There are “No Skateboarding” signs posted around the plaza to deter skateboarders. Despite the skateboarding ban, skaters all along the East Coast travel to Pulaski, and local community skaters frequent the spot almost daily. I focus on this site, specifically, because it is poignantly located at the crossroads of street skateboarding culture, urban design, governance, space, and belonging. Throughout this thesis, I elaborate on how these concepts emerge and reemerge in different ways at Pulaski Park.

Qualitative data for this thesis was collected through two main research methods, participant observation and interviews (semi-structured and informal conversations).

With my participants' consent, I also took photos and videos. Consent was not required for photos that did not include any identifiable information.

Semi-Structured Interviews and Informal Conversations

For the duration of my research, I conducted semi-structured interviews with a total of twelve skateboarders. This research took place during the second year of the COVID-19 global pandemic. Thus, all interviews were conducted outside at Pulaski Park, except one which occurred over the phone. I had informal conversations with five additional skateboarders both at Pulaski and over the phone. I followed proper COVID-19 safety guidelines, such as wearing a mask and socially distancing from my participants during interviews. I also kept a liter of hand sanitizer available for myself and participants. Additionally, I interviewed an urban planner and a National Park Service cultural anthropologist, which both took place online via Zoom. These interviews and conversations ranged from twenty minutes to one hour. The skaters' ages ranged from 16 to 50 years old, and five identified as female and the rest were male or unidentified. The skaters' race and ethnicities ranged, with a majority of them being people of color, specifically Black Americans. Only two of the skaters I interviewed were white. All interviews and conversations were conducted in English. I recorded and transcribed interviews conducted over the phone and online via Zoom, and for interviews in-person at Pulaski, I took detailed notes. To protect the anonymity of participants, I have given all

skaters and interviewees pseudonyms, except in instances where the participant did not want to remain anonymous.

Participant Observation

A majority of my time at Pulaski Park was spent observing how skaters at the plaza utilized the space. This entailed a wide array of activities equally including skateboarding and non-skateboarding. I recorded any field notes and observations I had in a notebook. Every time I went to Pulaski, there would usually be the same group of skaters, commonly referred to as locals or regulars. Many of these regulars had been coming to Pulaski since the 1990s. Through snowball sampling, I was introduced to one of the regulars named Mark. After having an informal conversation with him on my first day of research, he eventually became a main point of contact on my subsequent visits to Pulaski. I would greet him first, and he would fill me in on any Pulaski skate news, discuss some of the history of the Pulaski skate scene, and introduce me to other local skaters.

On some days, I would watch Mark film other skaters. Mark had been part of the local Pulaski skate scene since the 90s and was a skate videographer. Skate videography is an essential aspect of street skateboarding. Videos of skaters performing tricks throughout different urban terrains and showcasing their distinct skate styles were instrumental in shaping the culture and aesthetics of street skateboarding. Mark carried around his video camera and filmed skaters as they performed tricks on ledges and over stair sets (while he, too, was on his skateboard). He had his camera and his board on him at all times.

I conducted research mainly on the weekends, which tended to see more than just the locals. Non-local skaters would come to check out the spot, and some tourists visited the plaza, walked through it, and left. I watched skaters as they arrived at the plaza on their boards and greeted the ones they knew who were already there. I watched them perform various tricks on and within the plaza's urban furniture. On busy days like Saturdays, small lines would usually form around a specific ledge or stair set because all the skaters wanted to try out the specific spot. Sundays typically saw fewer skaters, so locals could use this time to practice tricks repeatedly without having to worry about anyone in line. There is a specific granite ledge located near the entrance of the plaza, next to the Pulaski statue, that I saw being utilized the most for tricks, and this is where I saw most of the lines form. Skaters waited to ollie, kickflip, board slide,³ etc. on/onto the ledge. If the skater did not land a trick the first time, they would get back in line and wait to try again. Next to this popular ledge was a three-step stair set that was used just as frequently. Skaters would ride up to try out a trick over the stairs.

³ These are but a few of the most popular tricks to do on a skateboard. Ollies are the basic foundation of most flip tricks, which involves the popping of the skateboard upwards. Kickflips and other flip tricks are when the skateboard rotates around its vertical axis, or its vertical axis and its horizontal axis simultaneously while in the air. A board slide is the sliding of the middle of the skateboard over a rail or ledge.



Figure 1 June 21st, 2021, Go Skate Day. The frequently used granite ledge next to the statue of Pulaski. Young skater riding up to the popular three-step stair set. Taken by author.

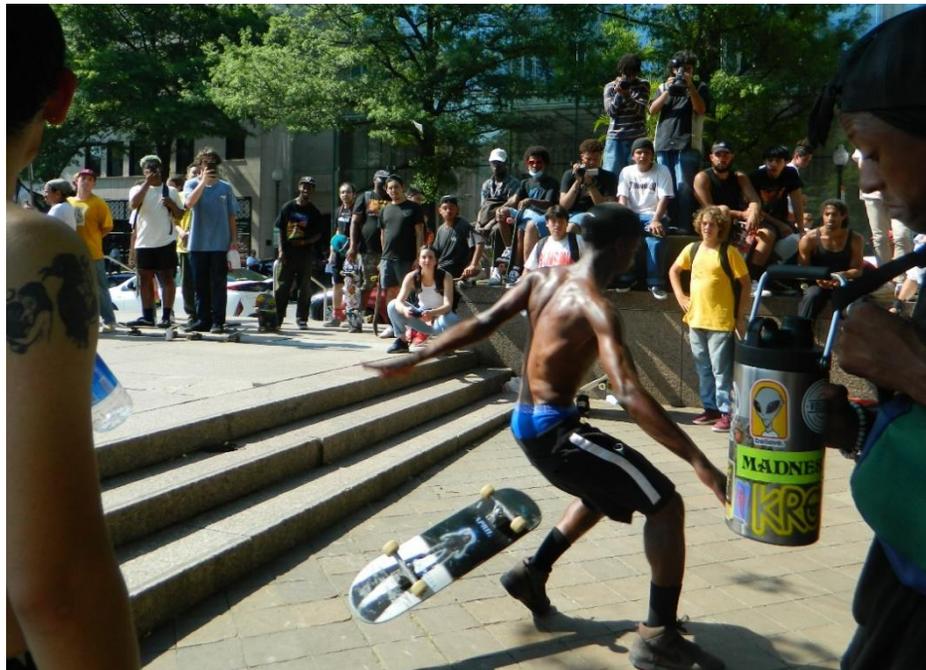


Figure 2 A better view of the popular three-step stair set. Go Skate Day 2021. Taken by author.

Next to these popular spots was another granite ledge for sitting, hanging out, and taking breaks on. This is where most of the local skaters would gather around. I held most of my interviews and informal conversations on this ledge and, since it had a perfect view of the stair set and other granite ledge, I could also observe skateboarding. It was best to talk to someone if they were sitting on this particular ledge, because it signified that they were not in the middle of a skate session, but rather taking a break or just hanging out. This led to some of my non-skateboarding observations. When not skateboarding, they would partake in various social activities such as drinking beer, listening to music, gambling, and chatting. Some of the local skaters I saw never skated during the time of my research but took part in these social activities instead. They were well known and essential to the local Pulaski community.

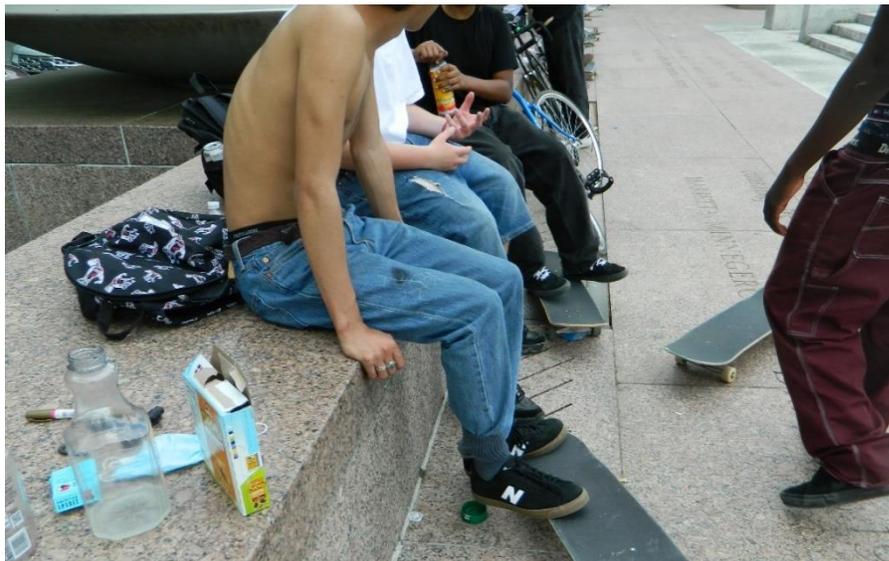


Figure 3 The “hang out” ledge, where I conducted most of my interviews. Taken by author.

Besides the stairs and the ledges bordering the plaza, the majority of it is flat ground and open space. Here, I would see skaters practice various tricks. On multiple occasions, someone had brought in (possibly taken from DOT, the Department of Transportation) two large orange cones. These would be placed together in the middle of the plaza as an obstacle to jump over. On the other end of the plaza, where the fountain is situated, saw little to no skaters. A skater or two would occasionally use the ledges next to the fountain, but most of the interaction was on the other end of the plaza. Since this was a less populated spot, I spent some time riding around on my skateboard in this area. I would also practice my ollies here because I was not in anyone's way.



Figure 4 MJ doing a kickflip over the two orange cones someone placed in the middle of the plaza. Taken by author.

In tandem with my participant observation, I took photos and videos using my Nikon L120 digital camera and some with my iPhone. With their consent, I recorded some of my participants' skate tricks and took photos of their tricks in action. I also took close-ups of the marble and granite ledges and the wear and tear they have seen after years and years of skateboarding.



Figure 5 The plaza's steps and open space. Taken by author.



Figure 6 Close-up of the wear and tear endured over the last 30 plus years of skateboarding. Taken by author.

Research Questions

The initial research questions for this thesis were as follows: (1) How does urban design and defensive design/hostile architecture influence the mobilities of youth skateboarders? (2) How does the presence of urban governance police youth street skateboarders' bodies in urban environments? (3) What are some of the ways youth skaters express agency and belonging in urban spaces? In these research questions, there is a specific focus on youth skaters. However, as I progressed in my research, I found that the plaza was a completely intergenerational site. I realized that solely focusing on youth would limit my ability to present an accurate depiction of Pulaski Park. Most of the local skaters who frequent the plaza are in their late twenties or over thirty. Thus, in my analysis, I shift focus away from only youth and instead aim to explicate the complexities of street skateboarding through an intergenerational perspective.

Outline of Thesis

In the following chapters, I will present ethnographic data collected at Pulaski Park to analyze three aspects of street skateboarding. The first chapter concerns the spatial practices of skateboarding in city spaces and closely examines Pulaski Park as a productive site of spatial and metaphorical contention and creation. In the second chapter, I examine the significant social relations that emerge at a historical skate spot like Pulaski Park. I examine intergenerational relationships, communal aspects of street skateboarding, territorialization, and aging at Pulaski. The third chapter focuses on street skateboarding and its relation to the mind and body. In this chapter I examine mental health and skateboarding, the embodied experiences of skateboarding, and how overt surveillance and policing of skateboarding transcends to an over-policing of the body, disrupting the mental health benefits of skateboarding. In my conclusion, I urge for the recognition of Pulaski as a historical site. Every day, the park runs the risk of getting redeveloped or redesigned in ways that can completely eradicate skateboarding. This thesis is an attempt to convince D.C. urban planners, city council members, and park police that this site is necessary for the greater good of the community.

CHAPTER ONE: IN DEFENSE OF PULASKI PARK

In a 2018 article titled, “Why is Pennsylvania Avenue’s Freedom Plaza such a Failure?” author Michelle Goldchain depicts the increasing sentiment among D.C. Council members, city planners, architects, and even civilians that Freedom Plaza is an architectural disaster. While the intention of the plaza’s design was to “be a place where street musicians, unsung poets, and self-styled orators perform for transient audiences” and a gathering grounds for pigeons, lovers, and fathers with their children, Goldchain and others claim this never came to fruition. Instead, the plaza is “an imposing concrete⁴ expanse with little to offer the public” (2018). The comments underneath the article tend to agree with this, going so far as to call for a demolition of the plaza. Even Denise Scott Brown, one of the original project designers of the plaza, also claims the execution of the plaza was a failure (2018). Yet, if one were to spend every weekend at the plaza like I did in the spring and summer of 2021, they would find anything but a failure. Jane Jacobs writes, “It is futile to plan a city’s appearance, or speculate on how to endow it with a pleasing appearance of order, without knowing what sort of innate, functioning order it has (1961, 14). So, in this chapter, I examine the functioning order already evident at Pulaski through its street skateboarding community.

Sociologist George Snyder writes about public spaces, similar to Freedom Plaza. They are deemed as failures due to their “failure to attract everyday citizens” (47), and by

⁴ This is false. The plaza is actually made up of granite and marble.

extension, failure to bring in consumers to make these spaces profitable. These “failures,” however, regularly succeed in attracting skateboarders. Snyder (2018) writes,

These plazas that many had thought of as failures of urban design, like Justin Herman Plaza on the Embarcadero in San Francisco, the Courthouse in West Los Angeles, Love Park in Philadelphia, and Pulaski Park in Washington, D.C., were actually skateboarding paradises. Here the lack of everyday citizens worked in the favor of skaters, who, undeterred by the bums, utilized these spaces to spend hours learning and perfecting their tricks. (48)

Through skateboarders’ usage of so-called failed spaces, I argue that they are able to revitalize these spaces, rendering them successful nodes of active cultural and social production. More intently, they activate these spaces in ways that would and could never become activated if it were not for their presence. Thus, I write this chapter in defense of Pulaski Park, to convey that it is anything but a failure. With this, I turn to Pulaski Park (Freedom Plaza), a culturally and historically significant site for street skateboarders, and outline the ways it succeeds in re-activating the urban architecture and contributing to the poetics and politics of urban infrastructure. I provide an extensive background on Pulaski Park, attempt to present an accurate depiction of the Pulaski skate scene, and draw on scholars of urban politics to outline the ways Pulaski is not a failure.

Freedom Plaza AKA Pulaski Park

Freedom Plaza, better known as Pulaski Park to skateboarders, is a public plaza located in Northwest Washington, D.C. This large, rectangular marble and granite-laden plaza is situated on a raised terrace platform and surrounded by steps on all four sides. Constructed in 1980 by Robert Venturi, it was previously referred to as “Western Plaza” and later renamed “Freedom Plaza” in 1988. The name was changed in honor of Martin Luther King, Jr., who wrote his famous “I Have a Dream” speech in the Willard Hotel

near the plaza. The plaza’s pavement features an inlay of Pierre (Peter) Charles L’Enfant’s 1791 citywide plan for Washington, D.C. Pierre L’Enfant was a French-American city planner who was tasked by George Washington to design the city plan, or layout, of Washington, D.C. (Fletcher 2008). This inlay can best be observed from a bird’s-eye view (or from the convenience store across the street). It also contains a fountain on one end and a statue of General Casimir Pulaski on the other. Casimir Pulaski came to America from Poland during the American Revolution to support the colonies in their fight against England (“Casimir Pulaski” n.d.). Appointed Brigadier-General in charge of Four Horse Brigades, he is known as the “Father of the American Cavalry” for his bravery and leadership during the revolution (“Casimir Pulaski” n.d.).



Figure 7 The statue of Casimir Pulaski at Pulaski Park. Taken by author.

The plaza is administered by the National Park Service (NPS) under the National Mall and Memorial Parks division and is categorized within the larger Pennsylvania Avenue National Historic Site. The NPS prohibits skateboarding at the plaza, which is made explicit to the public by signage posted around the entrances that say, “No Skateboarding.” Despite this prohibition, Pulaski Park has been deemed a world-famous skate spot, bringing in hundreds of skateboarders from around the country (Chittum 2019). When pro-skateboarders visit the East Coast, one of their main skate destinations is Pulaski. Pulaski has been featured in multiple online skateboarding videos, including ones by *Thrasher Magazine* (See [Plazacation: Pulaski](#)). With no benches, picnic tables, or other modern-day amenities, the plaza is barren and underutilized by the “everyday citizen.” While it is not alluring to random passersby, the granite and marble ledges, the stair sets, and the wide-open space is a dream to skateboarders. Although it is common knowledge that those who skate the plaza may encounter the police, and even police raids in some instances (Nieratko 2014), Pulaski Park remains a valuable spot for street skaters. Centered within a hub of government buildings that house people in power, it has also been a space for many political protests and civil community events, especially after it was renamed Freedom Plaza in the 1980s. Thus, Pulaski Park is a significant location to examine the complex entanglements of urban design, governance, and street skateboarding.



Figure 8 Skaters situated atop the General Pulaski Statue at Pulaski Park. Taken by author.

Freedom Isn't Free

*“The tourists call it Freedom Plaza. We name it after the general Pulaski statue.”
Jimmy Pelletier from the DC Wheels*

One of the first things I learned about “Freedom Plaza” was that only tourists called it Freedom Plaza. To skateboarders, it was Pulaski Park. The name Pulaski is derived from General Casimir Pulaski, whose statue is situated on one end of the plaza. In addition to distinguishing themselves from tourists, it is also used as a nickname between skaters to distinguish where to meet up. In the *Thrasher Magazine* video “Plazacation: Pulaski Park,” Darren Harper, a local Pulaski Park skater, says that they name it after Pulaski because he watches over them. He says, “He’s always been watching over us. The man on the horse. He’s seen it all” (ThrasherMagazine 2020). The

statue's name is an easy way for skaters from all over to know where to meet because they can easily find out where the statue is. On the other hand, "Freedom Plaza" is a bit more ambiguous, as it does not signify any specific location or symbol.

Another reason skateboarders do not call the site Freedom Plaza is simply because, to them, there was no freedom there. Their freedoms were constantly being infringed upon. Jimmy Pelletier, skater and founder of the skateboarding team and charity organization, The DC Wheels, recounts, "We also felt there was no freedom there for a while, so why call it that? Ya know?! The park police used to impound our skateboard like a car and give us \$50 tickets to get our board back and chase us and tackle us at some points." By confiscating their boards and treating the skateboarders as criminals, their freedoms were taken away.

Since the late 1980s and 90s, skateboarders began to solidify Pulaski Park as a prime skate spot, bringing in skateboarding legends such as Carlos "Pooch" Kenner, Chris Hall, Pepe Martinez, and more. However, the rise in popularity and a cohort of youth skateboarders grinding on the plaza's ledges led to an increase in policing. The park police, specifically, were the arbiters of how the plaza was utilized and by whom. As noted in the quote above, the park police did not want skateboarders at the plaza at all. They would give skaters tickets and try confiscating their boards. Local D.C. skater Bobby Worrest, who had been skating the plaza since the 90s, recalls a time skateboarding at Pulaski when, "cops on foot and in cars rushed the whole plaza trying to bust everybody" (Nieratko 2014). In one instance, my participant told me, the police had

brought horses onto the plaza (and let them leave their feces all over the plaza) to push out skateboarders.

To skaters, *Freedom Plaza* was an oxymoron. By calling it Pulaski, skateboarders point out the contradictions in naming a site after “freedom,” when in reality, people get their freedoms taken away at the site every day. This highlights how intended usage, in this case “freedom,” of city space may never become realized. Skaters, however, activate and remake the space by renaming it in their image. In doing so, they do two significant things: one, they pay homage to the site itself by naming it after the statue situated within the plaza (interestingly, this has been done to Love Park in Philadelphia, which is formally known as John F. Kennedy Plaza, but renamed Love Park by the skateboarders after the iconic “LOVE” statue). Tourists and outsiders might see the statute and not even know the history attached to it. By naming the site after Pulaski, skaters act as oral historians, passing down knowledge to those who venture to ask. And two, in renaming the plaza, they stake a claim in ownership of it and use it as a way to distinguish between locals and tourists.

Proximity to Power

*“Skating at Freedom Plaza is also like a middle finger to authority, because of its location, its proximity.”
-NPS Cultural Anthropologist*

Pulaski Park’s location in Washington, D.C., cannot be understated. Located near 14th Street and Pennsylvania Avenue, the open plaza is situated in the midst of government buildings such as the National Theatre, John A. Wilson Building, which

houses the Executive Office of the Mayor and the Council of the District of Columbia, and the Trump International Hotel. It also has a direct line of sight to the US Capitol Building and is less than a mile from the White House. The plaza itself has an inlay of the original map of Washington D.C., which can only really be seen from a bird's-eye view. When skateboarders coast across the plaza, they are metaphorically coasting across the city and traversing it in their own ways.



Figure 9 A bird's-eye view of Pulaski's inlay. "Freedom Plaza." by Rob Pongsajapan is licensed under CC BY 2.0.



Figure 10 A direct line of sight to the Capital from the plaza. “Freedom Plaza, Washington DC.” by adrimcm is licensed under CC BY 2.0.

In an interview with a cultural anthropologist from the National Park Service, we spoke about the location of Pulaski and the original design of Washington, D.C. He mentioned how the plan for the whole layout of D.C. originated during a time of Enlightenment thought, where rationality and reason were valued over traditional power and authority, and liberty and tolerance were widely accepted ideals. As a result, the city was structured in a way to ensure there was always a direct line for citizens to those in power. With a direct line of sight to the US Capitol, Pulaski, and its inhabitants, mainly skaters, have a direct line to power. This was mainly evident by the theme of the 2021 National Go Skate Day, “Push for Freedom.” Skaters from all over the DMV (District of

Columbia, Maryland, Virginia) area gathered and cruised⁵ or “pushed” from Malcolm X Park, or Meridian Hill Park, to Pulaski, skating by the Capitol along the way and traversing the city as a collective to bring awareness to the plight of Black Americans in the US.

Along with Pulaski’s Push for Freedom, the plaza’s proximity to power has also rendered it a popular spot for non-skater political protests and civic gatherings. It has hosted major US protest movements such as Occupy D.C. in 2011 and the Women’s March in 2017. During my research, the National TPS Alliance was conducting a 43-day hunger strike to urge President Biden and members of Congress to grant permanent residency to families with Temporary Protected Status (TPS). Therefore, due to its lack of comfort amenities, Pulaski is a prime site for citizens to exercise their civil sovereignties and anti-authoritarian sentiments instead of a place to hold leisure activities.

One of my participants noted how the change in name from Western Plaza to Freedom Plaza especially played a role in bringing in more civil protesters and community events. Named after MLK Jr., the plaza is a symbolic place in which people can rally together to fight for freedom. The two groups, the TPS Alliance and street skateboarders, although containing vastly different goals, coexisted in the space. During my research, I never witnessed any conflict between them. I even watched some skateboarders riding their boards up to the TPS tent to take a pamphlet or listen to a TPS speaker demand their rights from a megaphone. Moreover, in an interview with one of

⁵ The act of riding on the skateboard with both feet on the board, usually on flat ground such as city streets and sidewalks. There are no jumps or flips involved.

the skateboarders at Pulaski named Marshall, he told me how he could be skateboarding at the plaza and see the Mayor of D.C. or other D.C. senators and politicians walking right by him. He said that it was interesting to skate by them, and he pointed out how some of the younger skaters would probably skate past a politician unknowingly.

Though there is the duality between skater and government official in this space, it is important, however, to make clear that many of the skateboarders I interviewed did not skate at Pulaski mainly to rebel against the government or embody anti-authority sentiments. Pulaski was instead a landmark for them, a place to come to every day and do what they love. I asked one of my interviewees, Dylan, whether the rebellious, transgressive nature had anything to do with the location, and he said:

For the main locals, they don't even recognize the Capitol, the Capitol is nothing to them—it's just a building. They've grown up seeing that. That's the craziest thing about this place, the experience is so different for the locals and the people that come there from out of town. The locals are there. Genuinely, almost every single day there's gonna be some of the crew locals chilling there, coming after work. They're gonna be there every single day. To them, that's their spot. What played into the rebellious vibe is the park police. That's really what plays into it. That adds a whole different layer to the skate-sesh. The rebellious aspect isn't really hardcore rebellious either. It more just stems from the fact that we want to skate the street. We don't want to skate a park; we are street skaters.

The local skaters who frequent Pulaski have a strong presence at the plaza. For them, coming to Pulaski is a part of their everyday lives. Some skaters who have been going to Pulaski since the 90s still manage to come to the plaza almost every day. Most of the time, the older locals do not skateboard. Instead, it is a way for them to connect with their friends. After years of skating at the plaza together, the local members become somewhat of a family. Apart from being the main spot for locals to gather, the architecture of Pulaski is one of the major reasons why it has become such a popular skate spot to those

not local to D.C. Dylan said, “The architecture is literally perfect. It is literally like they made it for skateboarders. . . It’s a massive open space for doing any flat ground trick, different sized ledges, different sized stairs. It’s kinda hard to find a big space like that in the city.” Now, I will further explore the poetics and politics of urban infrastructure in relation to street skateboarding at Pulaski.

Skateboarders as Infrastructure

While the plazas that skateboarders occupy get deemed “failures” or “unproductive,” I contend that the street skateboarders at Pulaski Park activate and re-activate spaces in ways that are both generative and productive. That which is unused like an empty swimming pool or untouched like a rusty rail in a hidden city alley, seemingly without life, are revived by skateboarders. Here, I borrow from the anthropology of infrastructure, namely, Brian Larkin’s (2013) analysis of the poetics of infrastructure and AbdouMaliq Simone’s (2004, 2021) concept of people as infrastructure, to contend that street skateboarders themselves become part of urban infrastructure by activating spaces in new and unintended ways and facilitating an embodied, nuanced experience of the city.



Figure 11 Eva skateboarding over a tree root that uplifted the plaza’s foundation. Taken by author.

Larkin (2013) writes, “The act of defining an infrastructure is a categorizing moment. Taken thoughtfully, it comprises a cultural analytic that highlights the epistemological and political commitments involved in selecting what one sees as infrastructural (and thus causal) and what one leaves out (330). He continues, “We often see computers not cables, light not electricity, taps and water but not pipes and sewers” (329). Regarding Freedom Plaza, D.C. Council Members and city planners see an empty plaza with dissident skateboarders, not a cultural and social hub of intergenerational community members and artists. Therefore, considering Freedom Plaza an architectural failure displays the political rationalities of D.C. planners and council members. The plaza’s success is based on a politics of belonging which categorizes what is worthy of

being seen and unseen. If the space was originally intended to bring in everyday citizens, how can one say Freedom Plaza is a failure if there are people, namely skateboarders, going there every day? This calls into question what it means to be an “everyday citizen.” Here, skateboarders are thought of as neither people nor active citizens. However, without the skateboarders, the urban plaza *would* be a failure. That which is infrastructural, I contend, is thus the skateboarders themselves, rather than the urban landscape they skateboard on.

In multiple interviews that I conducted with skaters at Pulaski, they mentioned how the plaza would be empty if the skateboarders were not there. Marshall, who has a day job in city planning, noted how there were rarely any benches to sit on, no tables, no grass, no vending machines: “It’s not user-friendly,” he said. Yet, Pulaski is *skater* friendly. As Borden (2019) speaks of the “rebirth” of terrain, Pulaski is a prime example of the rebirth of urban space and ideals. Even though its intentions to bring in a certain kind of public failed, it was remade and reborn due to the street skateboarders who go to Pulaski every day. In this sense, it is not a failure. It is only a failure in so far as it does not bring in the “right people,” which is determined socially, politically, and economically as Larkin notes.

Furthermore, the “failure” of urban design and its reappropriation by skateboarders highlights two scholarly ideas. One, it aligns with sociologist Robert Park’s claim of the city as something to be remade. How skateboarders view and traverse their urban terrain reflects their heart’s desires, and in doing so, they remake a mundane elongated stair in a back alley into both a spectacle and something to be activated. Scuffs

on the wall or cracks in the ledges leave behind both a literal and figurative trace of their reworkings of the city. These traces suggest, “I was here, I transformed this space, and I activated this otherwise inactive part of the city.” Two, where design “fails,” people succeed. I turn to A.M. Simone’s conception of *people as infrastructure* to suggest that street skateboarders are a prime “infrastructure” in the city.

In AbdouMaliq Simone’s (2004) essay, he explores how the “urban ruins” of inner-city Johannesburg might possibly “constitute a highly urbanized social infrastructure” which makes certain economic and cultural spaces available to those with limited means (407). While infrastructure often denotes technical and physical aspects of cities like pipes, cables, and highways, and are there to make cities operate productively, Simone extends this notion of infrastructure to people and their daily activities (2004). As we have seen above, people, like skateboarders, can reproduce city spaces and make productive that which is seen as a failure of urban design. Moreover, the ways people engage with different objects, spaces, and intersecting cultures and values can, as Simone writes, “become an infrastructure—a platform providing for and reproducing life in the city” (2004, 408). Where there is architectural infrastructural failure (according to urban planners, not skateboarders) at Freedom Plaza, the skateboarders themselves succeed as a form of infrastructure, engaging with the ledges in new ways and enlivening the plaza with art, creation, and social cohesion.

Street skateboarders at Pulaski Park also participated in their own localized economies and commerce practices outside of larger capitalist corporations. For example, the skateboarders at Pulaski urged others to buy skateboards from the local D.C. skate

shop rather than from large skate brands. They promoted and uplifted each other's skateboarding companies and brands by repping their stickers and t-shirts. The skateboarders at Pulaski Park participated in their own economic and consumption microcosms outside of institutional consumptive practices.

In a reflection on his 2004 essay, Simone writes, "The attempt was thus to lend collective life the energetic language of infrastructure – through surges, reticulations, chokepoints, circumventions – that emphasized the intensities and conditions of people enacting occupied spaces between bodies" (2021, 3). Lending the language of infrastructure to skateboarders can help legitimate their active roles in creating spaces of social cohesion and cultural production. The skateboarders at Pulaski Park also view and activate the space in ways no other citizens can, thus forming the foundational infrastructure to keep the plaza enlivened. In an interview with Dylan, he said,

Once you start skateboarding you just see the whole world differently. Everything becomes a spot, I walk past a stair set, it's not just a stair set, I'm instantly thinking about is that skateable this and that, walk past a ledge, and the whole world becomes your playground. Everything you see, you're like, "how can I skate it?" We see the world as a whole playground, especially a city.

If skateboarders are capable of not only activating but also seeing their urban environments with a wholly new perspective, then they can recreate what infrastructure in the physical sense (cables, handrails, stairs) look like in cities. These new perspectives of infrastructure will then allow for reorganization and redesign of space that benefits the local communities and people that dwell in and make up them.

Conclusion

While often delegitimized, street skateboarders' usage of urban space is active, legitimate, and infrastructural. The everyday lived experiences of street skateboarders at Pulaski Park do not just entail skateboarding on the urban furniture. Skate spots are sites where members of the local community engage with each other socially, economically, and politically—this is what active community spaces in general look like. For some local skaters, Pulaski is a place to express their livelihoods. Darren Harper poignantly states, “Pulaski, this is like one of the last plazas. Sometimes I go home, and I pray, “don’t take this from *us*.” It means a lot to *us* and we’re hoping to keep it going forever” (Thrasher Magazine 2020).

Though the protesters and events that do occur at Pulaski Park are ephemeral, one thing at Pulaski remains constant: the skateboarders. Much like the pipes that hold systems together, which are seen as infrastructure, the skateboarders do the same thing for Pulaski. They are the continual infrastructure which contribute to the plaza's longevity and liveliness. As Darren says, they keep it going. With the skaters present, the plaza sees less crime. With the skaters present, the plaza also sees families, fathers, daughters, and brothers. The skateboarders *are* the “self-styled orators” performing their tricks to everyday spectators, and they are the “unsung poets,” their poetry found in their reimagination of space. Everyone whom the original designers intended for the plaza is there, except maybe the pigeons.

CHAPTER TWO: “SILLY RABBIT! TRICKS ARE FOR KIDS”: INTERGENERATIONAL SOLIDARITY, AGING, AND BELONGING IN SKATEBOARDING

On my first day of research, I traveled to Pulaski Park with the intention of uncovering questions I had about the relationship between street skateboarding and youth culture. While I initially sought to interview youth skaters aged 16 to 25, I instead found myself talking to a group of skate “moms” in their 40s and 50s. Contrary to popular belief, these women were not recalcitrant skaters committing transgressive acts or destroying public architecture. Rather, like many of the other skateboarders at Pulaski Park, young and old, they enjoyed skateboarding and the social and communal aspects associated with it.

In this chapter, I explore how street skateboarding spots are the prime place to elicit intergenerational solidarity and cohesion between adolescents and older adults. Moreover, I outline the ways in which Pulaski Park is a prime Intergenerational Contact Zone (ICZ). Intergenerational studies analyze urban spaces as potential areas of intergenerational contact, but there is a lack of research done on street skate spots. Concomitantly, scholarship on street skateboarding mainly focuses on youth mobilities and their interactions with space, and so escapes the purview of studies on aging and intergenerationality. Here, I connect these two strains of scholarship to present an examination of intergenerationality in street skateboarding spaces, specifically drawing from fieldwork at Pulaski. I argue that the social and historical skate scene of Pulaski

Park allows for the melding of social relationships between the old, young, and in between.

Intergenerational Contact Zones

In *Intergenerational Contact Zones: Place-based Strategies for Promoting Social Inclusion and Belonging*, Kaplan et al. define Intergenerational Contact Zones (ICZ) as spaces where different generations can gather and interact with each other, and in some cases, address local community issues (2020). Their book includes a wide array of scholarly contributions on the connections between space, place, and ICZs. There is a chapter on urban public parks and even one on city cycling spaces that highlight the spatial dimensions of intergenerational connection. It is interesting, however, that public skate spots have eluded this area of research.

Furthermore, Kaplan et al. (2020) offer eight dimensions of Intergenerational Contact Zones to determine how these spaces develop and function. The dimensions include the physical, temporal, psychological, political, institutional, virtual, and ethical. I use this framework to examine the ways Pulaski Park meets the criteria to be considered a significant ICZ. I outline the site's ability to elicit intergenerational solidarity, create multigenerational spaces for play, and contribute to an intergenerational belonging and dwelling in city spaces.

Aging and Play: Skate Moms and Skate Elders

Before heading to Pulaski, I was in contact with one of the skate “moms,” named Bee. We met through a mutual skater friend, and she was the one who invited me to this “Asian Skate Mom Meet-up.” (This was the name of their group chat invitation. All of

the “moms” were of Filipino-American ethnicity). Bonding over their love of skateboarding, the skate moms planned the meet-up at Pulaski Park to skateboard and catch up on life. Since the COVID-19 pandemic had been ravaging the world for over a year by then, the plaza, outside and spacious, was the perfect place to meet.

When I arrived, there were three “skate moms.” Bee was in her early 50s and had been skating for at least four years. I remember her brightly neon-colored skateboard wheel earrings glistening under the spring sun as we traversed the plaza. Although she came up with the “mom” moniker, she did not have any children. The other skate mom, Jennie, brought her child along. Her daughter, aged five, donned skate gear, from a helmet to knee pads, and they both had their own skateboards. Jennie had only been skating for a year, but was hoping to keep doing it as her daughter was naturally akin to the ways of the board. I watched her daughter get fearlessly creative with the board by repeatedly flipping and jumping on it. The last mom, Nora, had been part of the local Pulaski skate scene since the 1990s and is what the Pulaski skate community would consider a “skate elder.” I will elaborate on what a skate elder is more below. When speaking with her, she acted as an oral historian of sorts for Pulaski Park, discussing with me the many changes the skate scene underwent since the 90s.

Since I, too, am Filipino-American, I found out later that day through a text from Bee that we made Pulaski skate history—it was the first time there had been that many female Filipino-American skateboarders at the plaza in one day. Apart from making history, this day of fieldwork subverted any expectations I might have had coming into the skate scene. Instead of a space solely occupied by youth, I discovered skate moms,

skate dads, families, and older friends. This is quite contrary to the skate culture represented in popular mainstream news and magazines. If you look through the *Thrasher Magazine* archives, I doubt you would find a cover story on Asian skate moms. Those that often get shown on the cover of *Thrasher* tend to be white or black males in their twenties to late thirties. The question of representation is something that Bee brought up during our conversation, which I mention below. However, here I discuss representation in terms of aging rather than ethnicity or gender (which requires further, necessary research).

We all had our skateboards, but most of our time was not spent skating. I occasionally saw Bee land a pop shuv-it or Jennie ollie, but for a majority of the time, we would cruise around to certain parts of the plaza, stop, and chat. The moms used this time to catch up, reminisce about old memories, and gossip about relationships, ex-partner's, and the like. As Chiu writes, "The plazas or parks that skaters frequent become their social milieus in which their self-representation, social actions, and social relations take place" (2009, 33). For the skate moms, this was not only a place to build upon social relations and reminisce about their past selves but also a way to help set a precedent for future generations. As I mentioned above, the moms were very proud of their cultural heritage and celebrated the fact that we made Pulaski history. Additionally, Jennie was raising the next generation of female, Filipino-American skateboarders by encouraging her daughter to skate, too. The skate moms, along with myself, elicited multigenerational social cohesion. Pulaski was a prime site for us to make both intergenerational connections and intergenerational precedents for newer skateboarding generations.

Skate Mom Identity. In relation to identity, I think it is important to note their usage of the term “skate mom.” A skate mom can mean many things. In the straightforward sense, it is a skateboarder who also happens to be a mom. In another sense, skate moms can act as motherly-like figures to younger skateboarders. For example, Bee was not a mother, but still used the mom name. Throughout the day at Pulaski, I observed Bee and Nora encouraging other young skaters. They would provide tips, tricks, encouragement and vice versa. It is also interesting to note the ways in which the usage of “mom” in this scenario may challenge normative assumptions about what motherhood is or what it looks like. Mothers are often stereotyped as caregivers or homemakers (Valiquette-Tessier et al. 2018). In relation to skateboarding, however, mothers can become “badass.” This is evident with Judi Oyama, a professional skater in her 50s, who started the clothing brand called, “Bad Ass Skate Mom.” Street skateboarding in this case, allows older females and mothers to redefine and subvert prescriptive ideas of the aging woman. Resisting the role of the homemaker, they instead embody attitudes of boldness, bravery, and “badassery,” which are mostly associated with men.

Bee started skateboarding not as a teen, but in her late 40s. When I asked what brought her to skateboarding, she spoke about how some of her friends were already skaters, and she wanted to try it out. Her then-partner tried talking her out of it, saying “You don’t really want to get hurt, do you?” This ageist retort stopped her from skateboarding, and she ended up taking her first (and last) surfing lesson instead. She went on, “and of course, the prudent thing was to wait another 10 years before attempting

to skate.” When she got an iPhone and downloaded the app, Instagram, she was reinspired to get into skateboarding. There, she found a wealth of amazing female skaters, older and young, and has been skateboarding ever since.

It was definitely an example of how representation matters, because I’d heard this one girl talk about skating ten years prior, and then I actually saw clips of women skating on Instagram when I got the smart phone. If I’d had the experience of seeing girls skate when I was a kid, I’m sure I would’ve started much sooner.

While in the past, the representation was lacking for her, Bee provides representation for skaters of a different generation in the present. Despite others pointing out her limitations as she got older, she found a way through skateboarding to create multigenerational social connections and formulate subversive identities. With the presence of skate moms in these multigenerational spaces, they are able to defy any assumptions about mothers and skateboarders.

Skate Elders. Much like the skate mom, the “skate elder” is also a moniker associated with a certain type of skater identity. As mentioned in this thesis, Pulaski has been a main skate spot since the early 1990s. The teens who used to skate Pulaski then, are now in their 30s, 40s, and 50s. One of my research participants, Mark, first brought up the term skate elder, which is attributed to the skateboarders who have been skating at Pulaski since the 90s. He, too, is considered a skate elder. Since these skate elders have been active at the plaza for so long, they hold a type of indigenous knowledge over the place, which they impart onto the younger generations. Remember above how I spoke about Nora’s historic tales of the Pulaski skate scene. Another example is Dylan, one of my participants, who said, “you become aware of the history of it once you start skating

there.” This is due to the skate elders’ relay of local skate knowledge. Here, they uphold an identity related to wisdom.

Within the psychological dimension of ICZs, one feature on Kaplan et al.’s list is the following: “Patterns of social inclusion/exclusion with regard to generational position” (2020, 5). At Pulaski, these patterns are evident between the skate elders and younger skaters. Not only are skate elders arbiters of skate wisdom, but they also appeared to be highly respected. On numerous occasions, I witnessed the young skaters sitting back and watching the skate elders as they performed on the marble and granite ledges, giving them first dibs at the space due to their level of experience and authority over Pulaski. Thus, we see certain patterns of inclusion and exclusion based on generation, but also talent. If you have been skating for a long time, you are more likely to excel at your craft than younger skaters, who might just be starting out.

Moreover, other major components of ICZs are space and place. Kaplan et al. write, “Shared places can be negotiated and designed to encompass multiple layers of shared meaning and experience” (2020, 5). Pulaski becomes a space of personal meaning and memory, and thus a place of identity for a lot of the skate elders. For them, going to the plaza is merely an everyday thing, a routinized part of life. When I was with the skate mom group, Nora and Mark spoke about the Pulaski skate scene with an aura of nostalgia permeating from them as they reminisced about the past. Since the skate elders, or sometimes referred to as locals if they are older and have been going to Pulaski for a long time, view Pulaski as a shared place of meaning, undoubtedly, questions of territory being to emerge. Dylan was not a Pulaski skate local but went to Pulaski to skate on

multiple occasions. When I asked him about the territorial aspect of the skate locals, he said:

Yeah, they are 100% very territorial, but not crazy territorial. There are lots of occasions that they make it known that you're not from around here. . . The main things that locals do is get annoyed when it gets crowded. They're their everyday, so it's weird to see people just come only once in a while. However, if you are extremely good at skateboarding, it does not matter. They instantly let you in. If you're doing crazy shit, they're like "who is that?!" The locals go back to the 90s. The main dude that's there all the time is Pulaski Pooch. The main D.C. OG (original), there every day. They've been there for a long time. Even pros (professional skateboarders) get their blessing from Pulaski Pooch before skating the plaza. . . There is a slight territorial aspect. For sure. Like many territorial people, the more you show up the less territorial they'll get. They recognize you.

In these multigenerational spaces, this act of territorialization makes sense. If Pulaski encompasses layers of historically shared meanings, tourists, new skaters, and weekenders do not share these same meanings. Thus, there is an impulse to protect those shared meanings. At the same time, the skate locals and elders are also very welcoming. They welcomed me, an outsider, into their space and allowed me to take up their free time with my questions. They wanted to share the history, while also protecting the sentimental value of the plaza. I also observed their welcoming of younger skateboard generations more so than other outside older skaters. A reason for this could be the skate elders' desires to pass on local history and traditions to new Pulaski generations.

Similar to the usage of "mom," the usage of "elder" disrupts common conceptions of aging. Skateboarding is not necessarily a team sport, there can be skate crews and teams, but they are usually not defined by age. Therefore, skating is not an age-segregated sport—for example, younger football players cannot play on the same professional field as older ones. Whereas, in street skateboarding, the ages range. A

perfect case of this was during the 2020 Tokyo Olympics. Alexis Sablone, aged 35, competed in the top 8 finals with younger skaters like Momiji Nishiya, aged 13. In addition, much like Bee, the skate elders defy expectations of what it means to age. Aging is highly contextual. For example, at Pulaski, age was not a deterrent or a focus. The term elder is used to signify not only age but knowledge and experience. Stemming from this, one critique I have with Kaplan et al.'s eight dimensions concerns the physical features of ICZs. They raise questions about accessibility and the comfort, convenience, and safety of these spaces (2020). I think this notion of comfort and convenience suggests that aging adults only search for comfort and convenience in public spaces. However, in street skateboarding, there is an entire generation of older adults partaking in high-risk related activities. Comfort and convenience regarding skateboarders are more of a mental and social feature of Pulaski as an ICZ rather than the physical urban design. Pulaski is not a comfortable urban space; there are no benches, grass, picnic tables, shade, etc. Yet, it brings in people from all different generations. Thus, it is important to stray away from ideas of comfort in the physical sense because it can obfuscate a whole aspect of intergenerational belonging, which concerns fun, play, and risk.

Authority, Role Models, and Intergenerational Relationships

Police Authority vs. Skate Authority. Youth skateboarders get kicked out of various skate spots by security guards, police, and business owners, all of whom tend to be older adults. In doing so, these older adults exude power and authority over the skater, who is often deemed less powerful and lacking autonomy. Therefore, it is significant when a youth skater sees an older adult *skateboarding*; their image of what a “grown up”

is or how one is supposed to act as they get older is redefined. Here, intergenerational contact zones work to filter positive and negative meanings of authority. At Pulaski, older skaters have the ability to bridge the gap between youth autonomy and youth perceptions' of older people. The elders do this by providing positive interactions with the younger skateboarders.

The political dimension of ICZs asks, "who is in charge?" At Pulaski, nobody is in charge. While the local elders do wield some form of authority, it is not top-down but rather experiential and circumstantial. For example, older skaters at Pulaski urge the younger skaters to avoid unnecessary conflict with the park police. I found in my research that skate elders are more cognizant of the police presence than younger skaters. This may be due to the fact that they experienced more police raids as teens and have learned to incorporate this provision into their everyday realities at Pulaski Park. Therefore, they hold knowledge and authority in the sense that "they've been there before, they've done it all, i.e., getting chased by security guards, arrested, etc."

My skate participant, Marshall, who was older, told me that he tries to teach the younger skaters how to interact with the police or citizens who might be "bugging" them. He tells them to listen to authority so as not to cause a scene. "If you leave when they tell you, they'll go away. And then you can just come back when they're gone. I try to tell the younger kids that the conflict is not worth it." He also teaches them to clean up after themselves to maintain the longevity of the spot. Speaking from past experience, he is able to impart knowledge to the younger generations.

Walker (2013) writes, “The multi-generational aspect of skating may also be helping to shape decisions which take place within skateboarding subculture. Many participants report lessening conflicts with enforcement officials as they matured” (69). If the younger skaters already have this kind of role model from the skate elders, the lessening conflicts can precede maturity in some cases. Walker (2013) also writes about the challenges youth skaters might face as being considered illegitimate policy advocates. In intergenerational spaces like Pulaski, they can prompt the help from older generations to exercise their autonomy.

Role Models. Springboarding off of notions of authority and youth legitimacy, I examine instances where skateboarders from older generations can act as role models to younger generations at Pulaski. Here, I would like to discuss the skateboarding team and charity organization called, The DC Wheels. The mission on their website reads:

The DC Wheels was founded in 2007 by Washington, DC, skateboarder Jimmy Pelletier. Since then, he has handpicked talent from across the metropolitan region to join him on a mission to help those in need, while also overcoming longstanding stereotypes that surround skateboarding by reinforcing positivity and supporting a healthy lifestyle.

Jimmy, a Pulaski skate elder, brings youth skateboarders together to host charity events, such as food and clothing drives, fundraisers for homeless people, and so much more, all while encouraging skateboarding. Here, Jimmy legitimizes youth skaters’ agency for change by providing them the space and opportunity to give back. Charity events like this convey to younger skateboarders that they have the power to make change. This is another way intergenerational skateboarding is beneficial. Older skaters who are seen as having legitimacy can relay legitimacy and power to younger skaters by including them

in community-based activities. It also sets a precedent for future skate generations.

Jimmy is a role model. And, inspired by The DC Wheels, a younger skateboarder might take the steps to start their own initiative.

Now, I would like to discuss the familial intergenerational relationships at Pulaski Park that allow for generational role models. On many days of research, I observed a father and his two daughters at the plaza. The father was a professional skater and local skate elder, and his two daughters were 12 and 5-years old. I did not interview them, but I observed them from afar. I saw that skateboarding was a way for them to bond. On one day, the 5-year-old was actually trying to teach me how to ollie off the stairs; she had way more courage than me. This was probably fostered by seeing her father and older sister skateboarding all of the time. On one occasion, I saw the father urging the 12-year-old to keep trying. She was practicing a kick flip and kept almost-landing it. Her father, with his years of skate experience, offered her tips like where to place her foot, to flick her foot harder, and so on. In this case, older skateboarder role models co-mingle with notions of family. It is a place for families to bond in active ways. It is also a safe space for younger generations. Younger skaters from ages ten and below frequented the plaza during my research, and they were always accompanied by a parent. Other skate elders naturally watched over them, too. I also found that skateboarding was a tool to bring together not only fathers and daughters but siblings as well. The skate dad's two daughters bonded greatly over their love of skateboarding. Additionally, Eva, a skateboarder I interviewed during Go Skate Day said, "It [skateboarding] also brought me and my brother closer because we never had to talk about anything if we could skate

and learn new tricks. It was enough.” Here, there was an unspoken bond between Eva and her brother that formed through skateboarding.

Kin-related family was not the only kind of family I observed at Pulaski. The local male skaters discussed how there was a sense of brotherhood among each other. Likewise, in a follow-up interview with Eva on her National Go Skate Day experience, which brought hundreds of outside skateboarders to the plaza, she told me,

The go skate was an amazing experience. Even though I was rather new to the skate community, everyone was so welcoming. I never once felt out of place despite my skillset or anything. You could be doing your own thing but still feel the sense of togetherness because we all had one thing we loved in common. No matter who you were, where you came from, or what you looked like, it felt like a big family coming together to have fun.

In this quote, Eva nicely surmises the positive feelings and familial bonds that the skateboarding community at Pulaski elicits. At Pulaski, skaters are territorial but also welcoming. They are not blood-related but also family. Street skateboarding at Pulaski is a way for all people to come together and share a common identity and bond over skateboarding.

Conclusion

I would like to end this chapter by describing some of my observations from the June 21st, 2021, National Go Skateboarding Day at Pulaski Park. I was not informed in any official way about the event, but I knew there might be a large celebration happening since Pulaski is such an iconic skate spot. I was right. Mark texted me the Pulaski Go Skate Day, “Push for Freedom” poster and invited me out to the plaza. When I first arrived, I could already feel something was different. Adrenaline and excitement filled the air as I saw

hundreds of skateboarders gathered at the plaza. I interviewed many skateboarders that day, and they had all traveled to D.C. from Virginia, Maryland, and other states on the East Coast. The celebration was not organized by any large corporation or event, which tends to happen in some cities (See Nike's sponsorship of Go Skate Day, York 2019). Instead, this felt like a grassroots effort to celebrate skateboarding and also spread awareness about the Black Lives Matter movement. I felt this sense of togetherness that Eva felt as well. This event was an example of what Emile Durkheim calls "collective effervescence" (Durkheim, Emile | Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy" n.d.). The "ritual" of this holiday creates a feeling and unifies people of all ages.

In Chapter Six of *Intergenerational Contact Zones*, anthropologist Jason Danely writes, "The sense of belonging and mattering that make a place feel like a community is central to the notion of 'dwelling,' or being-at-home-in-the-world. . .such that one is capable of caring for and being cared for by others" (2020, 70). Pulaski Park fosters this kind of intergenerational community. As mentioned throughout this chapter, older skateboarder generations take care of and look out for the younger ones. It is also a place, that is not home or work, for older adults to dwell and feel a sense of belonging. Danely further retorts,

Collaboration and inclusion in ICZ design provides a chance to try to see the world from the point of view of a person of a different age, but not only to gain a kind of knowledge about that person's limitations. . .but also about their capabilities; not according to fixed assumptions about what generations are, but also about how generations could be. (69)

This is primarily evident in the ways older skaters like the moms and the elders redefine their identities and what their generations may represent as they age.

Through a joint love of skateboarding, people from various demographics come together at Pulaski. Unlike skateparks, where you will find mostly younger people, Pulaski is a prime site of intergenerationality. These intergenerational relationships are helpful in determining Pulaski as more than just a place for teens to “skate and destroy” but rather a significant place where meaningful relationships and social interactions can develop, redevelop, and expand. As these places are often cited as important locations for social relations in academic skateboarding discourse, the lack of research on intergenerational relationships in skateboarding communities is striking. In this chapter, I explored the intergenerational relationships evident in my research at Pulaski Park and how they were integral to the development of youth skaters’ autonomy, older adult identity, and the strengthening of the Pulaski Park skate social community.

CHAPTER THREE: MIND, BODY, AND THE SKATE STATE

It is not every day that you see a 13-year-old getting choked by a police officer in the middle of a city street. This was the scene, however, in Hot Springs, Arkansas on National Go Skateboarding Day in 2007. To celebrate the holiday, 13-year-old Jarad Graham and five of his friends went skateboarding in the streets of Hot Springs. They were in a historic downtown strip, which violated the city's guidelines against skateboarding, and thus were spotted by the local law enforcement. Instead of ticketing the skaters as was proper protocol, the police officer resorted to excessive violence, choking Jarad, threatening and pushing his friends, and arresting all of them (Eddddd 2007). There are still arguments to this day over whether the police officer's actions were justified since the skateboarders were technically not allowed to skate on that strip. However, I use this example not to argue who was in the right but to present an analysis of how the policing of street skateboarding adds a corporeal dimension to skateboarders' already everyday bodily experiences.

Skateboarding is a corporal activity in numerous ways. Firstly, it is a physical activity, often used for transportation, exercise, sport, and self-expression through physics and endurance. It is physical in another way—through the policing of skateboarding by law enforcement. Since street skateboarding is viewed as transgressive in most city spaces, physical conflict and altercations, unsurprisingly, occur regularly between skateboarders and law enforcement, as is the case with Jarad and his friends. In this chapter, I discuss the interconnectedness between street skateboarding and the body,

namely how it relates to the mental and physical health of skateboarders. From this, I attempt to also understand how this intersects with the policing and corporeal punishment of skateboarders' bodies. Chihsin Chiu (2009) uses the concept of "body space," which is "a space that the person's body occupies and is consciously aware of. The perceptions and experiences of that space penetrate a person's emotions and state of mind, sense of self, social relations, and cultural predispositions" (2009, 33). Through research I collected at Pulaski Park, I borrow this concept of body space to illuminate the mind-body experiences of skateboarders, which can be both beneficial and taxing. I also explore how these mind and body connections play out in politically contested urban spaces such as Pulaski Park. In the last section, I outline the policing of skateboarders' bodies and depict how this policing not only adds another layer to their bodily experiences in urban spaces but also disrupts and limits the body spaces they create through skateboarding.

"The Freedom was Better than Breathing": The Mind and Body Effects of Street

Skateboarding

"Nothing will beat cruising at sunset, it's like golden hour through the city with your homies—like, that's it man, that's like an ultimate high you can't beat" – Mikey Santillan

In street skateboarding, there are no rules. Unlike organized sports like football or soccer, there are no coaches and no scheduled matches in street skateboarding. With a skateboard, comes the freedom of movement and self-expression at anytime and

anywhere. Whether you are a professional skateboarder bombing⁶ hills in San Francisco or a beginner just starting to get comfortable cruising down streets, achieving a feeling of freedom and awareness on a skateboard is inevitable. To my participant, Dylan, “Skating around, cruising through the streets, feeling the wind flow through you, with your friends or solo is one hundred percent a form of escape and freedom.” He continued, “This is honestly by far my most favorite thing to do involving a skateboard.” The themes of freedom, escapism, and mental health spanned across a majority of the interviews I conducted during my research, which I will summarize below.

In addition to the body space concept, Chiu (2009) emphasizes how skateboarding is a highly bodily experience. Chiu writes,

Skaters use their bodies to experience urban environment through sliding, kicking, jumping, flipping, and many other movements. Such bodily practices create mindless moments when the role of mind takes the back seat, allowing the individual to connect with the surrounding in an intimate fashion that walkers and drivers have hardly ever experienced. (33)

Therefore, skateboarders experience a completely unique corporeal experience with their environments. The environment at Pulaski Park, in particular, encourages this corporeal experience through its urban design and layout. The plaza tends to attract many street skateboarders, and by doing so, it helps foster these unique body and space connections. In addition to bodily experiences, the “mindless moments” that Chiu discusses were apparent to the skateboarders I interviewed. For example, when I asked Bee if she found skateboarding beneficial to her mental health she said, “Oh definitely! It forces you to be

⁶ Hill bombing is the practice in which a skateboarder rides down, extremely steep hills at high speeds. Hill bombing is most popular in the hill-laden streets of San Francisco (Holmes 2021; See also Creagan 2014; Jonassen 2021).

in the moment and focus on the present, otherwise. . .you die! *laughs* of course, the cardio and exercise aspects help with mental health. . .But really, just skating alone is helpful, for getting out of one's head." In the same vein, Eva said skateboarding was a way to clear her head. She loved the fact that she could skateboard with friends or alone and it would still be a means to "just get away" and enjoy the moment. Pulaski Park is a unique spot because its architectural layout not only provides skaters with the opportunity to meet and interact with other skateboarders, but it also provides a space for skateboarders to be alone. Due to the vast open structure of the plaza, skateboarders can have alone time by cruising across the plaza or practicing tricks on the end of the plaza that is empty most of the time. For example, when I first met one of my participants, MJ, he was skateboarding alone even though there was a crowd of skateboarders on the opposite end of the plaza. Because the plaza is such a large, open space, and the main skate spots are on the surrounding edges, it can be a great spot to "just get away."

At this juncture, skateboarding offers a form of escapism, a way to clear one's mind from any stressors or anxiety in their lives. It also allows a true sense of being present. Skateboarders, like Bee said, must be in the moment and aware of their surroundings in order to avoid risk. At the same time, they are still exercising, which also contributes beneficially to mental and physical health. In relation to body space, their state of mind is cleared, and associations of freedom become attached to the urban terrains and spaces they traverse. Professional skater, Austin Cosler best highlights the freedom in body spaces when he says, "The most joyful thing you can get from just a

little simple piece of wood. . .there's just so much freedom to it" (Lovgren 2012). This freedom gained from the board translates to a freedom of the mind and body.

Regarding mental health, Eva told me, "I started skateboarding in the beginning of the pandemic. I was pretty depressed at the time and had no reason to leave the house. My brother was always bugging me to pick up a skateboard, so it was actually the perfect time to do so." Skateboarding helped with her depression and allowed her to connect more with her brother and make friends with other skateboarders. Similarly, an interview I had with a skater named MJ, 25 years old, was very heartening. He shared how he used to battle severe drug addiction, and skateboarding was one thing that helped pull himself out of it. Instead of staying home and doing drugs, he would go outside and skate. He suffered an injury after a while of skateboarding and had to take a break. When I interviewed him at Pulaski, it was actually his first time at the plaza and one of his first times skating again. He looked really happy to be back and was even happier to have me take photos and videos of him. Skateboarding, to him, was a life saver, and Pulaski Park was the perfect venue for him to get back into skateboarding due to its vast layout. He also mentioned how the location of Pulaski was really convenient for him because it was close to the Federal Triangle Metro Station.

In addition to mental health, I would like to point out the addictive nature of skateboarding that many of my participants mentioned. Nora, the skate mom and elder, told me that when she started skateboarding as a teen, it was like she caught a bug; she could not stop going to Pulaski and skateboarding with her friends. Moreover, skaters like DJ Martin talk about skateboarding in a similar way. In the documentary *Freeling*, he

exclaims, “If I don’t skate for a few days, it’s like I’m off my meds!” (Lovgren 2012). Some skateboarders also describe the feeling of skateboarding as a kind of body “high,” similar to a runner’s high. For many skateboarders, it becomes not necessarily chemically addictive but a bodily and social experience that they simply want to repeat every single day. Skateboarding is not only a physical activity but also a *feeling*.

For many local D.C. skateboarders who frequent Pulaski Park, the plaza is *the* place to itch this “bug,” obtain these “skate highs,” or feel a sense of freedom on the board. Not only is the architecture perfect for practicing tricks and cruising around to clear one’s head, but the skate community that has formed at Pulaski overtime also provides skateboarders with an environment of acceptance and belonging. It is a place where many skateboarders can connect with others who have shared interests and identities. For some skateboarders, like the skate elders, Pulaski may be the only place that they can escape the struggles of everyday life.

From the ethnographic data above, I outlined some of the significant mind-body connections that street skateboarding encompasses. While on the board, a skateboarders’ mind is cleared, and they are completely in the present. They must be hyper aware of their surroundings, whether in the skate park or an urban plaza. Skateboarding is thus, a grounded experience that taps equally into the mental and physical. Skaters are especially able to tap into these mind-body spaces and can achieve these experiences at skate spots like Pulaski Park due to its urban layout and ability to foster a skateboarding community.

Battling the Board: Mental and Physical Taxation

It is important to mention that street skateboarding is not always an entirely positive experience mentally and physically. When I asked Dylan if skateboarding is good for mental health, he surprisingly said, “yes and no.” He continued,

Skateboarding can become a very intense mental and physical battle. There are times when you will try a trick for hours—and trust me—by the hour mark, the experience begins to change. Many skaters can become extremely frustrated by the continuous attempt resulting in failure. I, myself, and many skaters will tell you they have screamed swear words at the top of their lungs and even been brought nearly to tears. It is actually insane, many times if you do not land the trick, you will even go home upset. . . even the ones [skaters] who almost never get mad, get to that point every now and then.

Street skateboarding requires mental determination and physical endurance and stamina.

This was especially evident during my research at Pulaski. I would watch the same skateboarder try a trick on the stair set over and over again. Mind you, the skater is pushing at increased speed over a high jump and falling, hitting the hard ground several times in a row. When they fall, they literally get back up and try again. Therefore, skateboarding can become physically taxing on the body. The design of Pulaski allows skateboarders to try these new, innovative tricks, but the plaza’s layout will not always conform to a skateboarders’ desires. Thus, they are not only battling with their board, but they also battle the plaza’s urban furniture, such as its ledges and stairs. While I did not observe this intense battle during my research, this sort of determination and physical taxation was evident at the plaza. It is also evident in *Thrasher Magazine*’s skate video series, “Rough Cut.” In these videos, we do not see the perfectly edited skate videos of professionals traversing their terrains and landing a trick first try. Rather we see behind the scenes, which can be, in their words, *rough*. Skateboarders will fall multiple times

trying to land a trick. By the time the nice, edited version is released, the skater looks dilapidated and sweaty as they finally land the trick. Not only is this physically taxing on the body, but it also effects one's mental health. Like Dylan said, skaters will get pushed to tears on certain occasions due to the frustration of knowing how to land a trick but not being able to do so. In the *Thrasher Rough Cuts*, there are countless videos of skaters throwing their boards or even breaking them. Although the mental taxation many skateboard professionals endure, i.e., Ben Raemers⁷ is a worthy area of focus, it is beyond the scope of this research project and should be spotlighted in future research. However, it is important to recognize that the ways skateboarders interact with their urban design and terrain, specifically at Pulaski Park, are not completely positive. How skaters traverse the architecture of Pulaski can be physically demanding and, at times, emotionally taxing. This adds another layer to their mind-body experiences. In the next section, I outline the interwovenness between the body and mind in skateboarding to uncover the ways in which corporeal punishment and policing can disrupt these body spaces at Pulaski Park.

The Skate State: Policing and Surveillance of the Body

For many skaters, their skateboard becomes part of their body. As Dylan described to me, after skateboarding since he was 11-years old, "The board feels like your feet now. It becomes a part of who you are." A skateboard enthusiast reiterates this when he states, "I see a skateboard as a limb, I feel more comfortable riding a skateboard than walking" (Jonassen 2021). The skateboard, then, is not only a means to do tricks or

⁷ He was a professional skateboarder who committed suicide in May 2019.

traverse urban terrains, but it is deeply intertwined with notions of the body and bodily identity. As mentioned above, the mind-body experience is inextricably tethered in street skateboarding. Therefore, I contend that if skateboarding is a highly bodily experience for people, and the board essentially becomes part of the body for street skateboarders, then the policing of skateboarding is by extension a policing of the skaters' bodily autonomy and individualized embodied experiences in the city.

In his seminal text, *Discipline and Punish*, Michel Foucault re-imagines meanings of "the body." In particular, he writes that the body is "directly involved in a political field; power relations have an immediate hold upon it; they invest it, mark it, train it, torture it, force it to carry out tasks, to perform ceremonies, to emit signs (1995, 25). It is in line with this definition of the body that I explore the policing of street skateboarding. Throughout this section, I bring the work of Foucault and scholar and skateboarder, Ocean Howell in conversation to examine the political and power dynamics of the policing of street skateboarders at Pulaski.

In "The Poetics of Security: Skateboarding, Urban Design, and the New Public Space," Ocean Howell (2001) argues that skateboarding exposes the processes of surveillance and simulation that generate public space. He explains how city planners, architects, and other institutions must employ a high level of surveillance of street skateboarding in order to generate what he calls *tactics* to deter skateboarding in public spaces (2001). "They studied and measured the minutest gestures of skateboarders in order to obviate their behavior" (14) he says. As he offers various examples of famous skate spot renovations to deter skateboarding, it becomes clear that this is less a kind of

surveillance to monitor crime but one to monitor the body and its multiple, everyday mobilities. Howell continues, “So you try to predict the behavior of undesirables and obviate those behaviors with subtle design techniques: bright lights in corners, narrow benches, rigid circulation patterns, and so on (14). This highly evokes Foucault’s description of how the body can become subjected. He writes that the subjection of the body can be direct and violent, which is evident in the opening scene of this chapter. But it is also “calculated, organized, technically thought out; it may be subtle, make use neither of weapons nor of terror and yet remain of a physical order” (1995, 26). This kind of subtle, calculated subjection over bodies is what Howell emphasizes with his analysis of urban planner and security tactics to deter skateboarding. Almost every skater I interviewed experienced either a direct kind of violence on the body or one of tactical subjection, and knew of at least one other skateboarder who experienced the same. One subtle, tactical way that I have seen the subjection of skate bodies is through the use of Skatestoppers. These signify who is unwanted or “deemed disorderly and thus worthy of removal” (Németh 2006, 298), in public spaces. They also signify who is *wanted* in these spaces.

To set the scene, the year is 1990 and the place is Pulaski Park. Nora was narrating to me a vivid memory she had of the park police while skateboarding at Pulaski one day. She prefaced by saying she would drive to the plaza and park on the street closest to Pulaski’s steps. One day, when she was skateboarding with the other Pulaski skateboarders, the park police stormed the plaza in an effort to chase them out. Before the police could do anything, everyone ran to Nora’s car and hid their skateboards in her

trunk. They were still told to leave the plaza, but none of them got their boards confiscated that day because they were safely hidden in Nora's trunk. From that day on, Nora's trunk was always a safe space for everyone to hide their skateboards. This speaks to Foucault's analysis of power and subjection. The power dynamics that the park police imposed on the skateboarders forced them to find new ways to evade policing, such as hiding boards in trunks or, in some instances, trash cans. While Foucault's notion of power over the body seems to always be top-down, I think the idea to hide boards in a trunk also lends some power to the skateboarders. If the park police cannot confiscate boards, it renders them useless. When trying to push skateboarders out, if there are no skateboards around, it means they are just policing people in a public space for no reasonable cause.

As I continued to speak with skate elders like Nora, Mark, and Jimmy, I realized that the 1990s was an especially significant period of conflict between skateboarders and the police. They shared numerous stories about the park police with me, revealing that the deterrence of skateboarding seemed to be law enforcement's top priority during the time. Nowadays, however, Nora said, "The police have more important things to do." This was apparent, as I never witnessed a police raid or conflict between them and the skateboarders during my research. Although, on most days, I still saw a line of police cars posted on one end of the street, with a clear view of the plaza.



Figure 12 Police lined up across the street from the plaza. Taken by author.

I think the constant policing that the elder skaters endured in the 90s onwards not only had effect on the physical body (through violence and conflict), but some skateboarders seemed to internalize this subjection. The trauma they experienced during interactions with the police as teens carried over into their adult skate lives. When speaking with and observing Mark, for example, I found that he was always highly conscious of the law enforcement's presence near the plaza. He knew instantly whether there were park police or D.C. police around and would point them out to me if he saw them. He also understood their schedules and rhythms; he knew the best times to come to the plaza to avoid the police and the best times to stay away. On one day of research, multiple D.C. cop cars came speeding down the avenue, their sirens blaring. As soon as

we (all the skateboarders and I) heard the sirens, it was almost as if everyone stopped dead in their tracks. I especially saw Mark, pause, and watch the cop cars zoom past us. They drove right past the plaza, attending to an emergency elsewhere. Once we could no longer hear the sirens, regular skateboarding activities began again. Mark was definitely aware of the police presence, almost as if he was trained to be vigilant towards their behavior, more so than the younger skateboarders at the plaza. This is due to the fact that he had experienced way more policing than the younger skaters.

Looking at the regulation of skateboarding by police can reveal a much broader perspective into the current police state and what they deem “policable.” In the 80s and 90s, skateboarding was heavily policed, appearing to be a top priority. However, there has been a shift in the past few years. Skateboarding at Pulaski Park has become significantly less policed than in the 90s. What then, instead, has become more policable? What does it mean when the police stop going after skateboarders? With COVID-19, civil unrest, and rising crime and homelessness rates in cities all over the world, I think Nora was right when she remarked that they have more important things to do. In retrospect, it now seems petty that the police went after skateboarders as much as they did.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have delineated the interconnections between street skateboarding, the mind and body space, and the policing of the body. Howell (2001) uses street skateboarding as a mechanism to understand how tactics of surveillance and simulation denote how public space should be produced and who does and does not

belong in public space. In another sense, street skateboarding can be a mechanism in which to explore how urban bodies are policed and what is deemed worthy of policing and being policed. Through accounts by my interlocutors at Pulaski Park, I explored the corporeal and internalized ways street skateboarders experience conflict with law enforcement. The policing of their bodies disrupts the body space, often related to freedom and self-expression, they attempt to create when skateboarding through urban spaces. It further impacts and regulates their mental and physical experiences in the city.

CHAPTER FOUR: CONCLUSION: DEATH OF A CITY, WHAT HAPPENS WHEN THE SKATERS LEAVE?

The Death of Love Park and Other Beloved Skate Spots

In February 2016, in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, street skateboarders from all around suffered a great loss. The beloved and revered skate spot known as Love Park was torn down and completely redesigned to eradicate skateboarding. Much like Pulaski, Love Park was a world-famous skate spot on the East Coast, and it too, is plagued with a history of contention with security guards, business owners, and city planners, which ultimately led to its demise. Love Park, formally referred to as John F. Kennedy Plaza, was created by city planner Edmund Bacon and architect Vincent G. Kling in 1965. Due to its urban design and layout, every skater and their mom wanted to skate the plaza. It featured everything a skater could ever dream of, marble ledges of varying sizes, stair sets, flat ground, and a world famous “gap” that countless professional skaters would travel to Philly just to land a trick over.

If one were to go to Love Park today, the iconic Love statue has been moved, the famous gap is gone, the varying ledges and stair sets are nowhere to be found, and any remnant of the vibrant, hectic, creative culture that skateboarders brought to the space from the 1980s onward is erased. Taking its place is a flat plaza, with greenery, benches, and shady spots dispersed throughout. Essentially, it is a sanitized, simulation of public space meant to bring in consumers and push out producers. Snyder (2018) writes, “Shutting down Love Park for skaters produced a mass exodus of one of the strongholds of Philadelphia’s creative class” (59). Banished from the park, this creative class is no

longer able to activate the space in ways that an everyday consumer, office worker, or businessperson could. The new design offers a passive experience. Love Park, as skaters and those that love to spectate skateboarders know it, is dead. This is not the only famous spot that has faced the guillotine, Justin Herman Plaza aka EMB, Hubba Hideout, Brown Marble, the list goes on (Elliot 2013). Is the death of a city synonymous, as Snyder puts it, with the mass exodus of skateboarders?

In *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*, author Jane Jacobs wastes no time expelling her opinions about urban city planners. In a pithy opening sentence she writes, “This book is an attack on current city planning and rebuilding” (1961, 3). The reason for this attack is due to city planners’ destruction rather than revitalization of city spaces through replanning and redevelopment—this happens, she writes, because they only understand how cities “ought” to operate and not how they *actually* operate in “real life” (1961). Learning how cities actually work in real life, she argues, “is the only way to learn what principles of planning and what practices in rebuilding can promote social and economic vitality in cities” (4). This insight brings us back full circle to the impression that “Freedom Plaza is a failure.” According to Jacobs, it is only a failure because it does not fulfill what it “ought” to by city planner and business owner standards. In real life, however, the plaza is full of vitality due to the presence of skateboarders. The main goal of this thesis has been to show the “real life” of Freedom Plaza, the life that goes by the name of Pulaski Park that is dynamic and energetic.

As I mentioned in Chapter One, Pulaski street skateboarders are infrastructural components to the plaza’s liveliness. Their constant presence brings in spectators from

around the globe, and the social and economic dynamics that occur between skateboarders keeps it operating. The intergenerational relationships mentioned in Chapter Two highlight the social and mutual support people from different generations can provide to each other in skateboarding spaces. Jacobs writes, “I think that unsuccessful city areas are areas which lack this kind of intricate mutual support, and that the science of city planning. . . must become the science and art of catalyzing and nourishing these dose-grained working relationships (14). In this chapter, I tried to expose the importance of these working relationships. In Chapter Three, I explored how street skateboarding is a form of freedom and escape for many people. Being able to skateboard at Pulaski Park offers positive mental, social, and physical benefits. It is evident, though, that the policing of these skateboarders’ bodies disrupts these entwined mental and bodily experiences.

Attempting to define cities or even urban hubs of social, political, and cultural production can be quite difficult. Cities, as we have seen, are complex, mobile, shifting, conceptual and physical all at once. In an effort to end on a less abstract note, I turn to the notion a “healthy city.” Kerr states, “Healthy cities are ones that can accommodate and promote diversity, and by segmenting city life into closed quarters, cities lose that life force that makes them so exciting. Isolating skateboarding into a specified corner causes all of us to lose, so it’s on everyone, skaters and non, to push for that diversity (2016). The definition of the healthy city here is one that is diverse and welcoming. In order for Freedom Plaza to represent the healthy city, it must welcome rather than ostracize the skateboarders that give it health.

Limitations, Contributions, and Further Research

Firstly, I would like to point out the limitations of this thesis project. Pulaski Park and Pulaski skateboarding culture is highly layered and complex. I believe it is impossible to highlight these complex layers after only four months of research. To understand and provide a more extensive account of the intricacies of Pulaski warrants years long study and ethnographic research. I also regret not getting Pulaski Pooch's blessing to conduct research at the plaza. If I had known that he acts as a sort of gatekeeper of Pulaski, that would have been my first research objective. If I were to conduct a more thorough investigation in the future, I would ask for his permission and also find time to interview him.

Secondly, I want to spotlight some of the skateboarders, scholars, and artists who are doing the work to spread awareness about skateboarding's potential to transform community spaces and bridge gaps between the public and large institutions. Spearheaded by Ben Ashworth and Garth A. Brooks, the case study, "Finding a Line from Fight Club to The Kennedy Center: How We Learned to Cross Invisible Bridges" is a perfect example of the ability for skateboarding to transcend different social and cultural spheres. The case study recounts *Finding A Line* (<https://www.benashworth.me/work#/what-is-finding-line/>) which is an on-going community-sourced art project that brought a makeshift skatepark to the John F. Kennedy Center in D.C. in one instance. See also Steve Robert's "Push to Start" which uses skateboarding, art, and digital media to build community and foster civic engagement in youth (<https://www.facebook.com/pushtostartskate/>).

Moreover, in this project, I did not delve into street skateboarding's relationship with toxic masculinities. The sense of brotherhood was very apparent at Pulaski, but I did not delve deep into this topic during my research. In this thesis, I did not explore representations of female and non-binary people in the skate community either, as their presence was not evident at Pulaski. Future research should be done on female and non-binary dominant skateboarding spaces to promote representation and uncover a whole new social and cultural dynamic in skateboarding. I also need to get better at skateboarding—as of writing this, I can only ollie.

Concluding Thoughts

In an analysis of Jane Jacobs's seminal text, Fuller and Moore (2017) write, "Proposals and policies that are drawn from planning theory do not consider the social dynamics of city life. They are in thrall to futuristic fantasies of a modern way of living that bears no relation to reality, or to the desires of real people living in real spaces" (5). This was an issue in 1961 during Jacobs's time of writing and is still one today. From the dismantlement of Love Park to the gentrification of H Street in Washington, D.C. and calls to demolish Freedom Plaza, policymakers and urban planners continue to miss the point of cities. By highlighting the infrastructural, intergenerational, and corporeal realities of skate spots such as Pulaski Park, I contribute to literature on aging studies, urban design, and urban politics by bringing street skateboarding, and the beloved spots that street skateboarders occupy, into the forefront. Including street skateboarders and skate spots in these conversations will allow scholars to rethink meanings of space and shift focus to different actors in the city. More importantly, I urge city planners, urban

planners, and even naysayers of skateboarding, to suspend their preconceptions about skateboarding for one moment and really look at the vitality that emanates from Pulaski.

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BIOGRAPHY

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