

## *Coming to a City Near You: Skate Parks!*



One of the more popular skate parks in Las Vegas, the Doc Romeo/Pro Park Skatepark is host to numerous competitions every year. Photo: Las Vegas Office of Extreme Sports

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By Peter Harnik and Coleen Gentles

Skateboarding sessions are filled with sick shuvits and transitions for salad grinds while, hopefully, not ending in a slam. Snaking in front of another skater's trick is absolutely unacceptable. Then there are Ollies and Nollies and kick flips; young daredevils know them all. With a unique language, culture, and style, skateboarders are riding an urban tide that is yielding scores of skate parks and adding a new layer of excitement and challenge to city recreation systems, but it's a layer that isn't fully integrated into them.

According to the "City Park Facts" survey, conducted by the Center for City Park Excellence, there are only 180 skate parks in the 75 most populous U.S. cities. Fourteen have none at all, and 23 have just one. On a per capita basis, only nine municipalities have more than one skateboard park per 100,000 residents—a sign that cities are far from accepting skateboarding as a mainstream recreational offering.

The sport has always been a bit of an outsider, and skateboard parks usually provoke two very different reactions. To one group, the noise, danger, strange-looking users, litter, and graffiti are horrifying. To the other, that's what makes it wonderful.

Skate parks attract mostly teenage boys—one of society's more challenging segments—and their younger and older brothers. Many people might balk at a facility that pulls together dozens of them, along with unsteady devices that can reach speed bursts of 20 miles an hour. But a successful skate park can lure troublesome youth off street corners, burn away energy and aggression, teach motor skills, stimulate motivation, reward practice, instill pride, eliminate boredom, and even become a morale booster for parents and the entire community.

Arguably, the biggest and best skate park in the nation is the 60,000-square-foot Denver Skate Park, a \$2.8 million facility that involved the input of 80 skaters and took four years to create. The park is located in the Central Platte Valley, a prime—and already noisy—piece of real estate in an excit-

ing, newly developed, urban neighborhood. Situated near the downtown area, railroad tracks, and Interstate 25, the fully lit park is surrounded by seats and a viewing promenade and is accessible by public transportation. “We’ve got rollerbladers, skateboarders, and kids on scooters and on bikes. Everybody uses it. It’s a huge success,” says Leslie Roper, field superintendent for Denver Parks and Recreation.

The park opens at 5 a.m., in time for skateboarders who want to stop on their way to work. Younger kids tend to come during the day. Young adults arrive in the evening and skate until the lights go out. “The skate park has its own culture,” Roper continues. “These aren’t the kids who play basketball or tennis. Tennis used to be popular, but now a lot of courts are unused. Needs change just as neighborhoods change. It turns out we had a huge unmet need for skating, and we’re very happy with the result.”

## AN INNOVATIVE HISTORY

Skateboards evolved from homemade scooters dating back to the early 1900s. These contraptions were fabricated from milk crates, two-by-fours, and roller skate wheels. Eventually, kids learned to balance without holding on and removed the crates. According to Kathie Fry, editor of *SkateLog.com*, the first aficionados, were “eager to recreate the feeling of riding a wave.”

The first skateboard was sold in 1959. Soon several California companies began mass producing wooden boards and fastening on clay wheels. By 1965, more than 50 million skateboards had been sold. But safety problems became overwhelming, and skateboarding went into a long slump. In 1973, the urethane wheel was invented, providing better traction. Coupled with a shorter board, the faster wheel enabled much better results, and a few intrepid hotdoggers became well known in the professional circuit. The sport’s new popularity led to the building of the first private facilities; Kona Skatepark, which opened in Jacksonville, Florida, in 1976, was the first. But even as skateboarding went high tech, it still remained dangerous, and rising insurance costs forced almost every park, except Kona, to close. Without exclusive parks, skateboarders moved into streets and public plazas, stirring up animosity from drivers, pedestrians, and residents.

While this second sales slump continued into the 1990s, technological modifications and skating techniques continued to make improvements. Finally, in 1995 it all came together with the exhibition of skateboarding at the first ESPN 2 Extreme Games. Publicity mushroomed – as did sales of equipment, clothing, and shoes – electrifying millions of young people. With so many new skaters on streets, sidewalks, plazas, curbs, railings, fountains, and benches, and

with no skate parks to serve them, the situation started to get out of hand.

Police first tried to quash the sport by dispersing the skaters. When that didn’t work, they instituted prohibitions and ticketed violators. That didn’t work either. The violators were so young that they didn’t understand the citations or were unable to transport themselves to court, resulting in the automatic mailing of arrest warrants. It took only a few “Skaters in the Slammer?” headlines to generate a public outcry, so communities began having conversations about finding legal public places for skateboarders to practice the sport.

## FINDING THEIR PLACE

Many residents consider skate parks to be LULUs—locally undesirable land uses in planner-speak—and they want them as far away as possible. And that frequently is the outcome. One Portland skate park is located under an elevated highway,



A skateboarder takes on the popular wooden vert ramp in the 40,000-square-foot Louisville Extreme Park in Kentucky. Photo: Louisville Metro Parks

and one in Sacramento is in an old equipment storage hangar next to the former landfill. A famous skate park in Honolulu is known as the Rat Cage.

However, not everyone agrees with the distancing philosophy. Most parents of teenage boys have qualms about letting them and their friends spend hours at an isolated facility beyond a freeway or behind a salt pile.

Struggling with damage to park walls and benches, the parks and recreation department in Wichita, Kansas, decided to create a special place for skateboarders, but in a central location. After researching practices in other cities, they chose a site beneath Highway 54. Although they needed permission from the Kansas Department of Transportation, there was no acquisition cost since the city owned the land. Opened in 2005, Wichita Skatepark is a 12,045-square-foot, all-concrete surface with a nine-and-a-half-foot-deep bowl, one of the deepest in the Midwest. Completely fenced, it is lit until 11 p.m. Construction costs came to \$480,000, with \$200,000 covered by a federal grant. Considering its location, noise from the park is not a problem, but there have been issues with graffiti and litter. With 60 to 70 skaters on any given day, the experiment has been successful enough for Wichita to build two more skate parks.

Louisville, Kentucky, went even further, choosing a high-visibility open-air location near downtown that is easily accessible, close to transit, and under the watchful eyes of many more passers-by and spectators. Built by Louisville Metro Parks in 2002, the \$3 million Louisville Extreme Park is one of the largest, outdoor, concrete skate parks in the country. At just under an acre, it includes a wooden vert, or vertical, ramp for tricks and is open to skateboarders, inline skaters, and BMX riders. Restrooms are included, no fees are required, and it's open 24 hours a day. However, for those under 18, Louisville has a citywide 11 p.m. to 6 a.m. curfew. Louisville Extreme Park has not been an unmitigated success. Most users—but not all—behave exceedingly well. But, excluding staff time, \$20,000 has been spent on repairs and graffiti removal since January 2007. The city has even shut the facility for limited periods, trying to send the message that bad behavior will not be tolerated. Recently, the city closed the restrooms for a month. “All in all, it's still a positive experience, if not perfect,” says Jason Cissell, public information officer for Louisville Metro Parks.

Almost universally, park officials find that the more input skaters have in a park's creation, the better they take care of it. Cuba Hunter Park, created in 2004 as Jacksonville, Florida's first public skate park, has instilled so much pride that users go as far as replacing broken equipment themselves.

In Albuquerque, New Mexico, planners provided young skaters with paper, pencils, and even modeling clay to get their input before finalizing the design of Los Altos Skate Park. In Omaha, Nebraska, officials gave kids disposable cameras and asked them to bring back pictures of their favorite skating locations—even if they were illegal—so planners could include similar obstacles and elements.

On the other hand, by eschewing the palatial approach, Minneapolis, Minnesota, has probably gone furthest in integrating skate parks and treating them as normal neighborhood facili-

## SKATEBOARDER SLANG

When it comes to the wild tricks executed at skate parks, skateboarders speak their own language. Here's a glossary for the uninitiated.

**GRIND** – sliding along an edge (such as a curb, bench, rail, coping, etc.) using the truck of the skateboard instead of the wheels or deck.

**HEEL FLIP** – a flip trick where the skateboarder flicks the front foot off the toe edge of the board while executing an Ollie, causing the board to flip (heel side first away from the skater) and spin underneath the skater. Then the skateboarder lands with both feet on the skateboard, wheels down. This is the opposite—and usually more difficult—version of a kick flip.

**KICK FLIP** – a flip trick where the skateboarder flicks the front foot off the heel edge of the board during an Ollie, causing the board to flip (toe side first towards the skater) and spin underneath the skater. Then the skateboarder lands with both feet on the board, wheels down.

**NOLLIE** – the skateboarder uses the nose of the board to slap against the ground and pop the skateboard up into the air. A Nollie is the same as an Ollie but using the front foot off the nose of the skateboard. Thus, Nose Ollie was shortened to Nollie.

**OLLIE** – the skateboarder pops the skateboard into the air using the back foot. The trick involves snapping the tail of the skateboard down while sliding the front foot up along the board and jumping. The effect is the skateboard appears to be stuck to the skateboarder's foot during the jump.

**SALAD GRIND** – a combination of a 5-0, or FIVE-oh, grind, a grind on the back truck with no other part of the skateboard touching the obstacle; and a blunt slide, a grind/slide with both the back truck and tail of the skateboard on the obstacle. Also called a crooked 5-0.

**SHUVIT** – a 180° lateral rotation of the skateboard. A shuvit is not popped and generally spins on the front or rear wheels or just above the ground.

**SLAM** – to fall while skateboarding.

**SLAKING** – continuously skating without giving others a chance; or skating an obstacle, pool, ramp, or rail while another skater is already skating it.

**VERT** – a ramp that transitions from a horizontal plane—known as the flat-bottom—to a vertical wall. Also known as a form of half-pipe.

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For a list of the 75 most populous U.S. cities with public skateboard parks, visit [www.tpl.org/cityparkfacts](http://www.tpl.org/cityparkfacts).



ties. The park and recreation board built six tennis court-size skate parks—one in each park district—and placed them near established recreation centers. Doing so automatically supplies the skaters with restrooms, water fountains, and parking spaces. The location also facilitates police presence on the officers' normal rounds. Moreover, the recreation centers provide alternative activities if the skate area happens to get too crowded.

Las Vegas also has a skate park in each of its 10 districts, ranging in size from 4,500 to 30,000 square feet. With more skate parks per resident than any other big city, Las Vegas has even created an Office of Extreme Sports. (One of its extreme athletes, 17-year-old Aaron Fotheringham, does tricks in his wheelchair that he terms "hard-core sitting." Inspiring others with disabilities, he recently perfected the back flip in his wheelchair, landing him in the *Guinness Book of World Records*.)

"We would have preferred a couple of really big skate parks as opposed to multiple smaller ones, but it's more expensive to do the bigger ones," says Joe Wichert, extreme sports coordinator for Las Vegas. "We had to retrofit a few facilities, but all of them have been successful. The first skate park opened in 2002, and we had 300 kids that first weekend."

Most of the parks are unsupervised and open from 7 a.m. to 10 p.m. On average, they receive 100 to 150 users a day. There have been so few problems that a citywide survey actually discovered more graffiti at city parks without skate facilities.

It also helps that Las Vegas has a Skate Park Coalition, a partnership of local police, fire departments, school districts, and private businesses. The coalition oversees the programs, concerts, demonstrations, clinics, and classes, and it raises funds to cover the insurance costs for their 12 major annual events, which draw as many as 15,000 attendees.

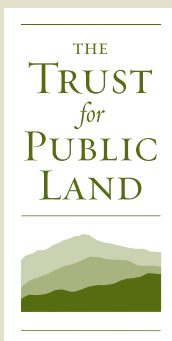
## BE CAREFUL OUT THERE!

Liability issues, including lawsuits and high insurance premiums, have hampered the spread of skate parks. Although the U.S. Consumer Product Safety Commission has found that skateboarding actually results in fewer injuries per participant than basketball, football, bicycling, and snowboarding, the sport nevertheless sends an estimated 61,000 people to hospital emergency rooms each year. There are two responses to the problem. One is to treat skate parks like swimming pools, erecting secure fences, hiring "skateguards" (like lifeguards), requiring safety equipment, and paying hefty insurance premiums. This approach is expensive and virtually requires the imposition of a facility fee. Ironically, the opposite approach—providing no staff at all, requiring no special equipment (although still recommending its use), and posting "Skate at Your Own Risk" signs—protects the city from most legal claims.

Another way to increase safety is to encourage adult spectators by including such design elements as benches, grassy berms, and observation areas. Las Vegas solved the liability problem by adding skate parks as a type of park amenity in the municipal code, thus putting a cap on its liability.

Whether skate parks are tucked away in neighborhoods or perched front and center downtown, they can play a significant role in a city's park system. They can be works of art, a public display of wood, metal, and concrete meant for grinds and heel flips, and great fun for participants as well as onlookers. Despite challenges, they have proved themselves popular and legitimate facilities in any comprehensive system. And as skaters everywhere say: "If your city doesn't have a skate park, then your city *is* a skate park."

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