

This is Our Place: An Ethnographic Study on the Reclamation of Public Urban Spaces by Young Skateboarders across European Cities

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ABSTRACT

Contemporary cities are complex hotspots of people with different interests. Especially in times of rapid urbanisation, cities can be sites of conflict over the use of the scarce urban space, as well as sites of resistance to assert claims on said space. This ethnographic research accompanies young skateboarders (aged 18-28) across various European cities and towns, including Madrid, Berlin, Paris, Dortmund, Maastricht, Heerlen, Freising, and Radolfzell. Using auto-photography and interviews, their experiences *with* and reactions *to* conflicts in different urban places are explored. The study finds that participants show a general desire to avoid conflict. Yet, when being excluded from public urban spaces, they feel they have a right to defend their access. In their claim on using public urban spaces for sport, the skateboarders fall back on a variety of means of resistance and formally or informally protest urban policy. This study is an exploration of how Henri Lefebvre's right to the city manifests in the praxis of modern urban life and provides a much-needed platform for young people to communicate their demands for more inclusive urban policy.

Keywords: urban visual ethnography, skateboarding, resistance, generational urban dynamics, urban anthropology

A Battle for the Right to the City

“Who owns [the city]?” is written on the banner of a protest in Berlin in 2014 (Weißmüller 2014). “The city belongs to the people!” states another banner at a protest in the same city eight years later (Tip Berlin 2022). Both protests took place in Berlin, where inhabitants, united in their dissatisfaction with urban policy, protested against private real-estate investors and the increasing commercialisation of the city. As early as 1968, French sociologist Henri Lefebvre, in the context of his work *The Right to the City*, drew attention to the fact that urban space is permeated by different political and social claims to ownership, creating conflict. Since Lefebvre's claim over 50 years ago, cities have undergone rapid change, characterised by population growth. While only 36% of the world's population lived in urban areas in 1968, this figure had risen to 57% by 2022 (The World Bank 2022). By 2050, this figure is expected to rise to 68% (United Nations 2018). This increasing urbanisation is accompanied by an increased demand and a simultaneous shortage of urban space. This shortage harbours even more potential for conflict, as can be seen, for example, in the recent protests mentioned at the beginning.

In this context, it is relevant to investigate the dynamics of diverging interests in urban spaces. More specifically, we aim to shed light on the perspectives of young people to further contribute to discourses surrounding urban places, spaces, and policies. To narrow down the dimension of ‘young perspectives,’ we decided to use skateboarders as our subject of investigation. While we acknowledge that not all young individuals share the same experiences as young skateboarders, we view this

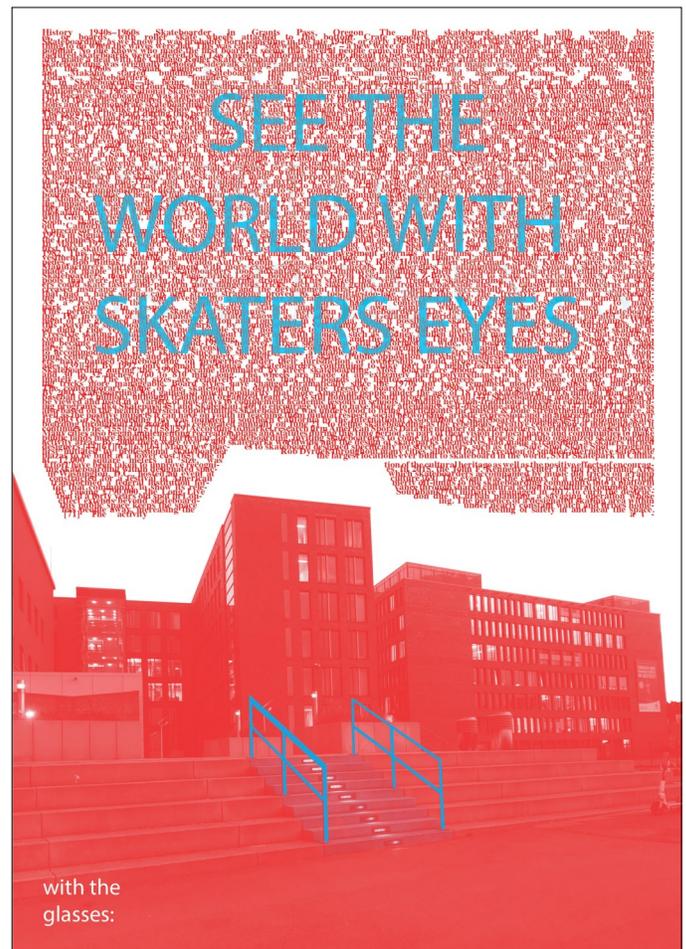


Figure 1: "SEE THE WORLD WITH SKATERS' EYES," 2020. Image by Finnian Lodey-Grevel.

subculture as a relevant case study that may resonate with broader youth demands.

Against this background, this ethnographic study investigates young skateboarders' (age 18-28) experiences and demands in different European cities and towns, including Madrid, Berlin, Paris, Dortmund, Maastricht, Heerlen, Freising, and Radolfzell. This not only provides insights into experiences of the past but ultimately contributes perspectives for a more inclusive city for the future. In particular, we want to shed light on their reactions to conflicts, since this emphasises the bottom-up agency of urban inhabitants, crucial to fully understand the power dynamics of urban conflict from young peoples' point of view.

To answer the question of how young skateboarders react to conflicts in public urban spaces, this paper is structured as follows: providing insights into the aforementioned right to the city and additions to this concept, the first section will present a theoretical framework. The subsequent Methodology

section will explain the qualitative and auto-photographic methods used. Then, we will present our results and discuss our findings with the help of quotes and auto-photographic support. Finally, the paper concludes by stating that our participants, next to a general and preliminary avoidance, make use of different formal and informal means of resistance to claim their right to the city.

Literature Review

Existing qualitative research on conflict in urban spaces often deals with intergenerational differences. This is relevant to our study as well, as skateboarders tend to represent a comparatively young age group within a city's population. The intergenerational lens provides interesting material on power relations created and perpetuated through urban design. In this context, Natalie Davet (2021) finds that urban design in Gothenburg, Sweden, reinforces power relations by either excluding or including different age groups from certain usages of urban space, focusing specifically on children and the elderly. Another author, Lefort (2020), finds that younger generations have different perceptions and usages of the urban space in Beirut, Lebanon, from older generations, moving the focus onto the individual's navigation of urban space. Other researchers have concentrated on means to overcome these generational differences in an urban context. Results include the importance of engaging in participatory design across different generational groups in Portsmouth, England and community-based projects that further intergenerational discourse in Ontario, Canada (Leddy-Owen, Robazza, and Scherer 2018; Parker 2018).

Qualitative research has also dealt with skateboarders or the culture of skateboarding in particular, relating it to conflicts in an urban context. Bäckström and Sand (2019) explore skateboarders' desire for using public urban spaces as opposed to skateboarding parks in Scandinavia, emphasising how the improvisation and exploration of unknown spaces is valuable for the sport and culture. Arising conflicts are implied yet not further explored. Karsten and Pel (2000) dig deeper

into this issue and find that skateboarders in Amsterdam, Netherlands, are in constant conflict with other residents of a city through the appropriation of public spaces for their sport, a practice which they call the "colonising of urban spaces." Similarly, Németh (2006), in a qualitative study conducted in Los Angeles, finds that skateboarders are excluded from certain public urban spaces by policymakers due to a perceived negative image of skateboard culture. Furthermore, the author explores the reclamation of these spaces through organised protests and marches.

Our study will build on this existing research, especially on the notion of conflict in an urban context and the exclusion of certain groups—in this case, young skateboarders—through spatial design and urban governance. Through participative research design, we aim to account for skateboarders' experiences in their respective cities and provide a space to voice their concerns and demands. Furthermore, we are interested in addressing a research gap by focusing on the reactions of young people to the conflicts experienced. Building on Németh's (2006) idea of reclaiming space through organised protest, we find it interesting to consider how simple everyday practices can serve the same purpose. Independent of legal restrictions and their protest, we want to find out whether and how the everyday experiences of young skateboarders could serve as a claim on public space, and how they navigate backlash from different parties.

Theoretical Framework - The Right to the City in Today's World

In his work *Le Droit à la Ville*, Henri Lefebvre (1968) argues for cities that are inclusive, democratic, and socially just, and establishes the idea of the 'right to the city,' a concept that has become famous within urban studies and is referred to by urban resistance movements all over the world (Domaradzka 2018). With this concept, Lefebvre (1968) provides a valuable tool for rethinking what makes *the urban*. He maintains that the inhabitant does not only have a right to the city in its material form, but more importantly, to the city as a space for interaction, exchange, and encounter—a right

to *urban life*. This approach sees the city through a practical-material lens; the right to the city entails the practical use of urban spaces in their material form. The main agent in creating the city, therefore, is the inhabitant who contributes to establishing social relations. The inhabitant is also the subject of Lefebvre's (1968) right to the city, which is directed at the belief that the city should serve the same people who contribute to urban life.

Lefebvre (1968) criticises how cities are generally ruled by market forces on the one hand and policymakers on the other. The right to the city opposes these circumstances and emphasises the interests of the inhabitants, an essentially democratic idea. For Lefebvre (1968), the city should become an ephemeral city, a space in which there are no fixed structures, but the city becomes the *oeuvre* — a work of art created by the inhabitants through participation in urban life and the appropriation of the materiality of the city, constantly recreating and reinterpreting public urban space. Lefebvre's (1968) concept essentially advocates for the right of the inhabitants to make the city their own and emphasises the value this holds for democratic and inclusive urban life.

This idea resonates with more recent literature, too, as can be seen in Ian Borden's (2001) work. Borden (2001) considers skateboarding a valuable tool for participatory and democratic urban life; based on Lefebvre's (1968) idea that urban space is actively *produced*, dominantly by political and market forces, Borden argues for skateboarding's transformative potential. By changing the experience and purpose of urban spaces, for example, appropriating handrails for creative bodily expression, the traditional use of the built environment is challenged, and a new space is produced. As in Lefebvre's (1968) ephemeral city, Borden (2001) positions the transformative nature of skateboarding as a counterforce to capitalist and exclusionary mechanisms—representing urban life as a power struggle for the right to the city. This is similar to the reading of skateboarding at the basis of this paper: as an inherently political practice that reclaims urban space and, at

times, presents active resistance to the exclusionary nature of the city.

Missing in both Lefebvre's (1968) and Borden's (2001) arguments is a critical examination of the reality of the ephemeral city. A space that is actively contested by different interest groups does not necessarily entail the freedom that is the right to the city for everyone, but can easily fall victim to the processes contested in the first place. Howell (2005) explores this phenomenon with the case study of 'Love Park' in Philadelphia, USA, a public plaza that in the 1980s became popular as a global skateboarding landmark. Skaters reappropriated the design and challenged the intended purpose until city officials banned skateboarding, and the architecture was redesigned to appeal to tourists and citizens of high socioeconomic status. Howell (2005, 40) argues that the Love Park presents a history of repeated gentrification, which ends not only with skateboarders losing their right to the city to a higher socioeconomic class, but that skateboarders themselves have acted as "shock troops of gentrification." By claiming Love Park, skateboarders drove out the homeless population in the plaza, which earned them support from parts of the public and city officials. Howell's (2005) analysis serves as a reminder that the ephemeral city is multi-dimensional and the scene of a struggle for the right to the city, where access for one group often comes at the expense of another.

Despite the importance of the concept of the right to the city as a lens to analyse democratic cities, some aspects of it remain unclear and unsolved. Lefebvre neither mentions an instance to grant the inhabitants the right to the city nor specific instructions on how to attain it. It is therefore necessary to also consider more specific modern nuances of Lefebvre's concept, provided by Andy Merrifield's (2011) 'politics of encounter' and Simone's (2005) 'cityness.' With politics of encounter, Merrifield (2011) emphasises the notion that *the urban* as defined by Lefebvre (1968) does not apply to modern cities—globalised, digitalised, touristic, and decentralised urbanity that blurs the borders of the city and raises the question of who counts as an inhabitant. Instead, in the aim of

rendering the abstract more specific and the obsolete timeless, Merrifield (2011) builds on Lefebvre's idea of urban life as the defining element of the city and declares encounter between people the main mechanism for urban resistance, and the main source of political power. When people in a city come together and stand up for their rights, Merrifield claims, this is the moment that political potential to realise their right to the city arises.

Simone (2005) focuses on a different limitation of Lefebvre's concept, namely the impossibility of realising the right to the city in a holistic way. The city is hosting a vast heterogeneity of wishes and demands, some of them, as he claims, being inherently contradictory. Consequently, urban policy, according to Simone, is unable to include and provide for everybody. Simone recognises this as an explanation as to why people turn to informal means to realise their aspirations, or in other words, their right to the city. The narrative of a group of young skateboarders claiming the streets of their cities is heavily based on the belief that everybody possesses the right to the city, and that this right, as abstract as it might be, provides for a city that is democratic, inclusive and socially just. But it also paints the picture of oppression in public streets, neglect from urban policies, and an overall denial of the right to the city that our participants experience. Building on Lefebvre's (1968) original idea, and using Merrifield's (2011) and Simone's (2005) nuances, this research tells the story of how young skateboarders navigate conflicts over the right to the city and how they resist exclusion from the public urban sphere. This research lays bare the dynamics of urbanisation and the conflicts it entails, as well as makes tangible Lefebvre's (1968) concept of the right to the city in revealing everyday and bottom-up practices of resistance. And most importantly, this research aims to present young voices: the wishes and demands that the participants have for the urban sphere, and that are largely neglected by policymakers and their fellow residents of the city.

Methodology: Interviews and Auto-photography

This explorative research for this article was conducted in November 2023 by combining two methods of data collection: auto-photography and interviews based on photo-elicitation. The sample spans eight participants aged 18 to 28, three identifying as female and five as male, with varied backgrounds in terms of nationality and occupation (see Table 1). Participant recruitment was conducted on various social media platforms. Most names appearing in this report are pseudonyms to protect the participants' anonymity (consensual exceptions are made to credit artworks used as photo-elicitation material). Our participants live in European cities, mostly in Germany and the Netherlands.

Auto-photography accounts for the ethnographic part of the research: the participants collected visual data relating to skateboarding and public space before the interviews. The photos provide a tool for us to see the city through a skateboarder's eye, rendering our participants central to the analysis (Thomas 2009). Furthermore, auto-photography allowed for the inclusion of ethnographic data from different cities.

The second stage of research consisted of qualitative in-depth interviews, either online or in person. The semi-structured interviews lasted 45–90 minutes and were based on open-ended questions on the one hand, and photo-elicitation on the other, exposing the participants to the visual data previously collected and asking them to recount the experience connected to the urban space or situation depicted. We made sure that all participants signed a consent form, and we have received permission to use their visual data for the report. The participants were given the liberty to determine the order and duration of the photo-elicitation, allowing them to set their own focus. This way, we as the researchers took a more passive role, allowing our participants to convey their experience the way they felt it was appropriate and accurate, in hopes of collecting data as authentic as possible.

Name	Age	Area	Skateboarding (years)	Occupation
Steven*	28	Madrid, Berlin	14	Recent Graduate
Julia*	18	Heerlen	3	Skateboard Collective Volunteer
Hailey*	24	Maas-tricht	3	Student, Head of Skateboard Collective
Louis*	19	Paris, Maas-tricht	16	Student
Nicole*	19	Berlin	1	Queer Skateboarding workshop facilitator
Gustav	21	Radolfzell	5	Videographer Apprenticeship
Liam*	25	Berlin, Freising	9	Student
Finnian	23	Dort-mund	7	Artist, Photographer

Table 1: List and demographics of our participants.
*Pseudonym.

The interviews were transcribed, and, since some were conducted in German, also translated. We made sure that the translation stayed as close as possible to the original to minimise bias. We then conducted thematic analysis as defined by Braun and Clarke (2006): the transcripts were coded with the software Atlas.ti looking for recurring patterns relating to the participants' reactions to conflicts.

It is important to note that we, as researchers, share several demographic characteristics with our participants. As two young German women living in the Netherlands, we are familiar with the types of urban environments most of our participants

live in. Additionally, being within the same age range as those we researched helped us build trust and better reflect their experiences in relation to our broader research focus on young people's experiences in urban contexts. However, neither of us is actively involved in the skateboarding scene, which may have somewhat distanced us from their lived experiences and the deeper meanings they attach to them. Yet, this distance allowed us to adopt a more analytical perspective on our participants' experiences in relation to urban environments.

The Right to the City in Conflict

To understand how our participants navigate the everyday battles over the right to the city, it is useful to first draw a rough picture of the nature of the kinds of conflicts they encounter. These conflicts varied in kind as well as quantity and ranged from direct and sometimes physical conflicts with residents, police, and security to more abstract conflicts concerning urban policymaking and urban design. Broadly speaking, the conflicts can be divided into two relational forms: 1) the relationship of the skateboarders to the city as a whole, concerning urban policy as well as the city's physical infrastructure, and 2) a more spontaneous and situational relationship to local actors, such as other residents.

Regarding the relationship of the skateboarders to urban politics, one theme repeatedly emerged: the transformation and privatisation of urban space. Some participants reported gentrification processes in their cities and mentioned how former skateboard parks were demolished and privatised as office space or private residential areas, without offering any alternatives. In addition to the gentrification and privatisation of urban spaces to favour citizens with higher socioeconomic status, as it is explored in Howell's (2005) work, there are also green urban transformations that render former skateboard parks unusable. Participant Louis, for instance, explains how his hometown, Paris, in the course of its sustainable transformation, has altered a historically significant spot for skateboarders in front of the Eiffel Tower, making it no longer skateable. As a

student studying sustainability and sustainable development, he on the one hand praises the urban greening but also emphasises that it was unfortunate for the Parisian skateboarding community and mentions a petition against the green lawn that replaced the concrete, aimed at stopping this transformation. Some participants also reported that the urban design and the physical infrastructure of their cities make it hard for them to reclaim the public urban spaces for skateboarding from the outset. 24-year-old Hailey, for instance, talks several times about the physical infrastructure of Maastricht, Netherlands, her student city, where she regularly encounters a conflict with the nature and texture of the streets:

The city is a bit divided by the river. [...] So that means that in my head, that one whole half of the city drops out. Where you can still skate in the inner city, that's the ---, eh well when you walk in the inner city in the streets with all the shops, then on the one side of the street there is one part that does not have any cobblestones. And then, theoretically, you can go there at night. But then, often, when I, for example, would want to skate to the supermarket in the evening, I skate on this part and I have to jump off again and again, because then there are the cobblestones again.

In terms of the second kind of conflict, all participants mentioned that they have sooner or later encountered direct verbal and sometimes physical conflicts with local residents, security, or the police. For example, 25-year-old Liam reports skating at a popular skateboard park in Berlin where aggressive confrontations with passerby and residents occurred:

We were just skating there. Just doing our thing. Suddenly, someone starts throwing potatoes out the window at us. And such situations, flying potatoes? Right? I don't know. You're just out there doing your thing and suddenly people come up to you and start yelling 'You can't do that' and 'Piss off' or 'Asshole.' I mean, really, people just completely lose their temper. I mean really. So, it goes in

that direction? These confrontations come out of nowhere.

Other participants reported being repeatedly chased away from public urban spaces by the police and security forces. Due to the lack of alternatives, they find themselves faced with constant potential for conflict, rendering street skateboarding a risky business that can escalate towards verbal or physical conflict at any time.

In summary, it can be said that the conflicts experienced vary widely in scope and form and do not necessarily only refer to conflicts in the form of direct confrontations with other people. Instead, they also address the participants' perceptions of either not being considered in the design of urban spaces from the outset or of transformation processes in urban areas. These experiences did not leave the participants without a reaction. Instead, they adopted forms of resistance to assert what they believe to be their right to the city. Our analysis identified three broader thematic areas: Avoidance, Formal Resistance, and Informal Resistance. These provide an image of how skateboarders react to conflicts that arise when using the urban sphere and are visualised in grey below (see Figure 2).

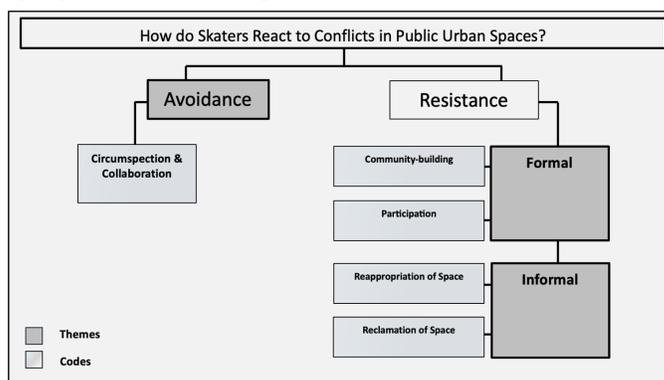


Figure 2: Visualisation of the analysed themes and codes.

Avoidance - Sometimes it is just Peace and Love

When asked how the participants deal with conflicts, one answer emerged from all the interviews: they often avoid them. Contrary to the socially prevalent conception of skateboarders as violent, they largely try to avoid conflict and instead strive for harmony, as the 28-year-old Steven puts it: "We need to just find peace and love [...], you know?" Steven, who is originally from Ecuador, moved to Berlin

(Germany) two years ago, where he still lives. He describes his perception that skateboarders are wrongly stigmatised by society as follows:

So that also brings me to the conclusion that the society [...], they are seeing us as if we are, kind of, something not good in general. You know, they immediately connect you with drugs, immediately connect you with violence, immediately connect you with alcohol, with all these kinds of situations. And it's like, okay, you know, I'm an athlete.

Steven repeatedly emphasises that "they," the society, would not do skateboarders justice with prevalent stereotypes. Contrary to associations with "drugs," "violence", and "alcohol," he emphasises that he is an "athlete," and that his focus is on athletic performance and social harmony rather than violence and conflict. In particular, his impression of the skateboarding scene as a group striving for "peace and love" stresses this avoidance of conflict.

Similarly, other participants repeatedly pointed out that they try to avoid conflicts and behave "collaboratively," "considerately," and "carefully" when skating. Among them is Gustav, a 21-year-old film-making student who

started skating in his hometown Radolfzell, Germany, five years ago. He reports that there was a lack of skateparks in the small town. Instead, he would go out with his friend searching for public places that met their requirements: A smooth surface, plenty of space, and a few obstacles for tricks. The front yard of a conference centre seemed a perfect fit for that, deemed by Gustav and his friends the perfect place to improve their skating (Figure 3).

The more regularly Gustav and his friends skateboarded there, the more often security personnel would come to complain about the loud noise, as people had to work in the building. Gustav reacted to the complaints in an understanding and cooperative manner instead of fighting back and entering into conflict, "It's kind of understandable when you realise, okay, they've got a really important conference right above us. Then you just go somewhere else, have a good time and then come back." Other participants were equally collaborative, emphasising that they were not necessarily interested in entering into conflict, but rather in exercising their passion for sports.

Our participants' behaviour acknowledges the multi-dimensional nature of the ephemeral city, lending consideration to the fact that

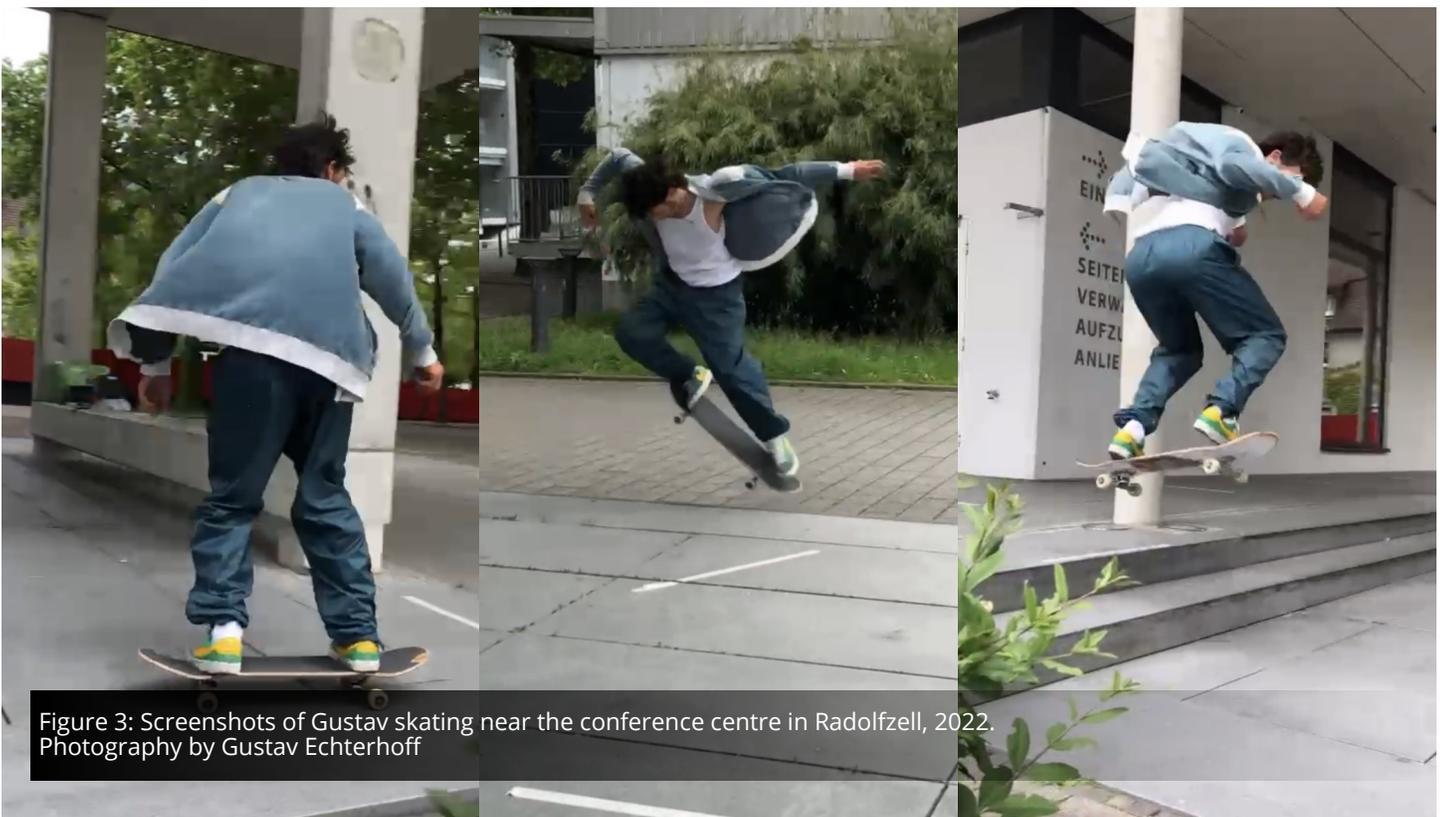


Figure 3: Screenshots of Gustav skating near the conference centre in Radolfzell, 2022. Photography by Gustav Echterhoff

asserting their right to the city can mean taking someone else's away (Howell 2005). To do justice to our participants and counteract the harmful stereotyping, it is important to emphasise that avoidance was prevalent throughout the interviews, and that codes relating to resistance appear only when they feel unfairly treated—when they feel like their right to the city is being taken away from them.

Resistance - Sometimes it is Active Protest

Many places are taken away [...]. My favourite bar had to move for a motorway [...], lots of clubs had to close [...], and my favourite skate park was also demolished. At first, I had hoped they would renovate it, but they tore it down [...]. We're also having discussions at the youth club and skatehall in the RWE area where I work at the moment. The RWE area will maybe also be demolished for an office building or something. Although there are so many cultural venues and this skate hall on this site.

The 19-year-old Nicole reports here that her hometown, Berlin, has undergone rapid change and the displacement of many residents in recent years. On the one hand, places that are important to her are increasingly being demolished or moved away, while on the other hand, top-down policy processes or private companies want to use these spaces to build motorways, office space or "luxury apartments," as she reports. The skateboarding hall where she is currently doing voluntary work for women skateboarders is also under threat of demolition. The 23-year-old skateboarder and artist Finnian from Dortmund (Germany) reports similar experiences. He notes that this development of urban spaces, characterised by commercialisation and displacement, has recently led to young people in several cities increasingly demanding their rights. According to Finnian, active resistance rather than avoidance is playing an increasingly important role in how young skateboarders respond to conflict. Throughout the interviews, terms such as "protest," "appropriation," or "reclamation" were used, which again point to a form of active

resistance in the skateboarding scene. We were able to distinguish between two forms of resistance based on the participants' experiences: *Formal Resistance*, which utilises the official tools and means of participatory societies, and *Informal Resistance*, which expresses an autonomous form of resistance, often performed by unofficial means.

Formal Resistance - You Should Speak Up for It

The concept of the right to the city, with its focus on creating an inclusive and participatory city for all inhabitants, represents a democratic idea at its core. The attempt to make use of this right is also partly undertaken with the given formal, systemic and grassroots democratic tools. This includes formalising an informal community by setting up institutionalised collectives. Several participants reported that they had either joined existing skateboarding communities or founded new ones. Hailey, for example, founded a collective in Maastricht, Netherlands, two years ago. She moved there five years ago for her education, where she continued to pursue her passion for skating alongside her global health studies. The collective tackles the feeling of a lack of social and political visibility of the skateboarding scene and aims to unite and support specifically queer and female skateboarders (Figure 4). In addition to creating a sense of community, the collective also serves to organise events and educational workshops. When we asked Hailey what the collective and the workshops mean to her, she answered:

So, I think in terms of the workshops, simply to be seen. This, but also being told: Hey you, you have the opportunity to make a change. [...]. And in general collectives, simply to know that you are not alone. Because I think all of us have these ideas, but no space for them to be heard. [...]. In a more political sense, it means resistance, active resistance. Especially in such an important sport or culture, because it is not always easy for us. That means it is an active resistance, actively having to dare and take a stand

again and again. This makes you much stronger.

This quote shows in many ways the empowerment in collectives, as Hailey perceives it. Not only does Hailey specifically use the word “resistance” to describe the effect that collectives have on her experienced conflicts, but she also considers the encounter itself an empowering act to resist invisibility - “to be seen.” This empowerment that Hailey feels, being able to “make a change,” strongly links to Merrifield’s (2011) emphasis on the ability to “overcome the inertia of mass powerlessness” (478) through encounter. Merrifield’s concept, ‘the politics of encounter,’ locates the power to reclaim the right to the city in social interaction. He points out that it is the act of encounter that unites people and motivates them to show solidarity with one another. It is the act of encounter that encourages them to form social movements. And it is the act of encounter that, according to Merrifield, contributes to people striving for

democratic values and ultimately claiming them for themselves: It is where Merrifield locates the democratic reclamation of one’s right to the city.

Not only community-building but also other formal democratic tools, such as citizen participation, were used by our interviewees. Here, especially petitions and dialogue with policymakers were crucial means. Finnian and Louis, for example, reported that they had used petitions to actively participate in the use and design of urban space. Finnian talked about how Dortmund’s skateboarding scene worked closely with the city council to create one of the “most important” cultural centres for young people. The DIY skateboarding spot ‘DIY Utopia,’ which was originally planned for three months, had been turned into a youth cultural centre lasting for several years and attracted a wide variety of young people. However, the place was threatened with demolition, and its organisers initiated a petition aiming to preserve the cultural venue. Louis from Paris



Figure 4: Collective for skateboarders in Maastricht, 2022. Photograph by Hailey.

(France) reported similar experiences, and a petition was initiated to preserve the historically important skateboarding venue at the 'Place du Trocadero' in Paris. The use of petitions can be seen as a bottom-up attempt to make use of the right to the city and democratically participate in the urban decision-making processes in an institutionalised way. However, in both cases, the petitions were unsuccessful, and the skateboarding spots had to give way to the top-down plans of urban councils or private owners, as the participants reported.

18-year-old Julia from Heerlen, Netherlands, provides another example of democratic citizen participation to resist exclusion from urban policy. Julia reported that she tried to enter into a dialogue with the head of the city. She told us, "If you want something in the city, you should speak up for it because if you don't, nothing's happening." Based on this conviction, she contacted Heerlen's policymakers to ask about the skateboarding park, which she and other skateboarders in Heerlen were promised would be completed by the beginning of 2024, but whose construction had not even begun at the time of the interview (December 2023). This attempt at democratic citizen participation and dialogue with policymakers also failed, as Julia reported. The only response to her enquiry was further promises about efforts to complete the skateboarding park, which still have not been put into action. She comments on her experience of failed political participation: "They make plans, but they don't make them come true. And that was the part that I am frustrated about." Both the petitions and Julia's frustrating experience in dialogue with political institutions demonstrated that attempts to achieve the right to the city through formal institutionalised and grassroots democratic means have failed in these cases. When we asked how Julia deals with these experiences, she smiled and said something that she had emphasised several times in the interview: "We're teenagers...if someone tells us not to do anything, then we're actually going to do it even harder...."

Informal Resistance - This is Our Place

As a result of the frustration with formal means of resistance, the feeling of not being heard by policymakers and being excluded from urban

politics, what Simone (2005) explains with cityness becomes true: our participants turn to Informal Resistance. They claim their right to the city, whether consciously or unconsciously, using unofficial methods that are often prohibited. One code arising from this is the *Reappropriation of Space*, something that Liam, a skateboarder living in Berlin, where he is currently studying Fine Arts, puts nicely into words: "That's how I see it. Wherever I can skate, wherever I can see it, I simply skate. I just don't limit myself to the skatepark; the city is my playground." This reappropriation of urban space for the sport's purpose can be considered an informal way of making use of the right to the city, self-directedly using urban elements to improvise and perform tricks. It is a reappropriation that happens in Borden's (2001) terms, through creative bodily expression, and that is reflected in a new view of the city, seen with special eyes viewing the architecture as an opportunity for movement. Finnian sent us an artwork he created to visualise the skateboarders' unique view, "See the world with skater's eyes." (Figure 5a & 5b).

The first set of designs shows a public urban space without the skateboarders' glasses (Figure 5a). The idea is to put on 3D glasses, and then the skateboarders' view (Figure 5b) appears, highlighting certain architectural elements. The text on the far-right image of Figure 5b says: "Skaters by their very nature are urban guerrillas: they make everyday use of the useless artefacts of the technological burden and employ the handiwork of the government/corporate structure in a thousand ways that the architects could never dream of. Finnian, as did Liam, wants to convey that skating ascribes a new purpose to urban architecture, resisting the conventional, narrow and static interpretations of what urban elements are made for. Finnian's choice of words, "urban guerrillas," highlights in an admittedly exaggerated way that the *Reappropriation of Space* is inherently political, somewhat participating in a battle for the right to the city. Other participants expressed a more innocent approach to street skating, with resistance often merely happening unconsciously or symbolically, but either way, the *Reappropriation of Space* represents an active usage of the right to the city. This happens, for



Figure 5a: City from 'normal' perspective, 2020. Photography by Finnian Lodey-Grevel.

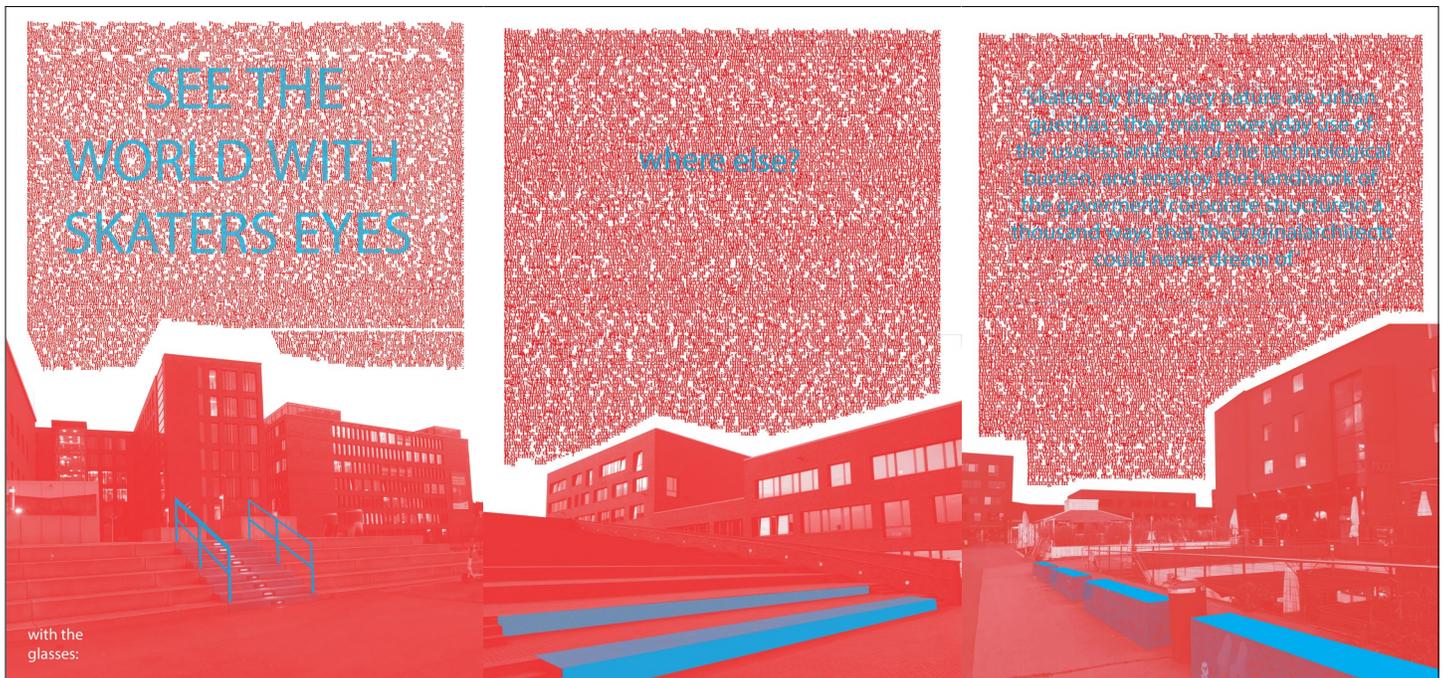


Figure 5b: City from a skater's perspective, 2020. Photography by Finnian Lodey-Grevel.

example, by alienating the stairs' railings from their purpose to provide stability and instead being used to perform a boardslide, a trick where the skateboarders slide down a kind of ledge at high speed. And even though this street skating is where most conflicts with other residents of the city arise, our participants express that they prefer the streets over skateparks, since this improvisation and creativity are an essential part of their sport. This puts into action what Lefebvre means by the ephemeral city, a city without fixed structures, in a playful and creative way. The structures of a city are reappropriated and reinterpreted from the bottom up. The skateboarders' view turns urban public space into an artwork, resonating with Lefebvre's idea of the oeuvre and Borden's exploration of the nature of skateboarding; a city that is being recreated with every new skateboarding spot that is discovered, and every new trick that is performed.

Julia's story reveals another means of informally resisting, another way of putting a claim on the right to the city in an informal way. She has been encountering the problem of not being able to skateboard the streets or skateparks during rainy weather, and since she lives in the Netherlands and the rainy season often stretches over the whole year, she expressed the need for appropriate indoor spaces to continue practising her sport. Gustav, who in the meantime moved to Berlin, similarly encounters a lack of alternative indoor spaces in his new hometown, which is why he and his friends resorted to claiming a pedestrian tunnel, and Julia and her friends have chosen a parking garage in Heerlen as their refuge (Figures 6 & 7). However, since these spaces are not made for skating, both have encountered trouble with security forces. Julia told us:

The thing is that if people keep sending us away and keep making trouble for us, it's almost this thing in our head, like: [...] this is our place. We need to send the security away instead of the security sending us away, you know? So, it's really like making a statement that we all agree on.

This quote emphasises a claim on the right to the city that goes beyond the reappropriation

of urban space: the demand to own it. Within this code, the *Reclamation of Space*, our participants express that they feel they have a right to use certain spaces even though they are officially prohibited from skating there. Part of this is also an escape to non-public spaces like the parking garage, once the public spaces do not provide for them. Steven doubles Julia's attitude, telling us about a conflict with the



Figure 6: Gustav reclaiming the pedestrian tunnel in Berlin, 2021. Photography by Gustav Echterhoff.

police that he encountered when he was living in Madrid, Spain:

So, I remember once [...] in Madrid, like we were in this specific spot, and they were having also a demonstration outside of the Congress. [...]. But we were skating, trying to skate the place. And the police just arrived and started to take our skateboards and put gas in our faces and stuff. As if we were there for the demonstration or something. So that was super crazy because like we didn't do anything, just using public spaces, you know, we are part of the society, of the community.

Julia's words, "this is our place," maintain a claim on the right to the city, and so do Steven's words, when he justifies his access to skating in public urban space by being a "part of the society," an inhabitant of the city. But this not only proves a general mindset and the skateboarders' demands to be included in the public urban sphere. The *Reclamation of Space* also exemplifies the dynamics of conflict and resistance that skateboarders experience in the

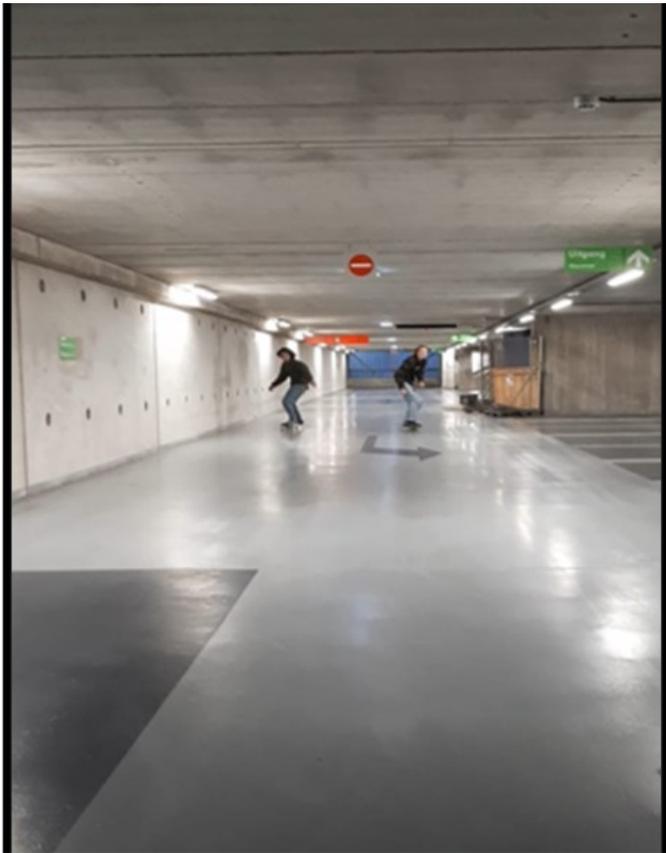


Figure 7: Julia and her friends reclaiming the parking garage in Heerlen, 2020. Photography by Julia.

urban sphere. Based on a lack of representation and the possibility of participating in urban policy, our participants turn to informal means to resist their exclusion from the public urban sphere and realise their right to the city. Furthermore, the use of first-person plural pronouns when talking about these acts of resistance stands out — "this is our place" — showing that community and collectively form the basis for the skateboarders' battle for their right to the city.

Conclusion - A Battle for the Right to the City

Modern cities are a complex hotspot of different people with different, and sometimes outright opposed, interests. Cities also host increased potential for conflict, especially in contemporary times of rapid urbanisation. Within the layered dynamics of conflict, the city can also serve as a site of resistance, with different interest groups asserting their ideas and demands for a more inclusive city of the future. This research has taken a group of young skateboarders as an example to lay bare the generational dynamics of conflict that they experience in urban spheres across European cities, investigating skateboarders' reactions to conflicts that arise in public urban spaces. Next to a general and preliminary avoidance of conflicts, this research has shown how, in the belief of possessing an inherent right to the city, these young skateboarders fall back on a variety of means of resistance, in formal or informal ways. It happens as a reaction to different circumstances that are deemed unfair, mostly relating to exclusion from urban policy and a lack of appropriate skateboarding spots to use.

With this explorative study, we have investigated how Lefebvre's (1968) theory of the right to the city manifests in the praxis of everyday life. But this study is also, and maybe more importantly, a platform for these young voices to tell their story and make their wishes and demands for future urban design and policy heard. However, it has to be said that this research presents the battle for the right to the city in a very specific and narrow light, which imposes certain limitations. It is a one-sided exploration of the urban dynamics of conflict and resistance, with the skateboarders playing the main part, whereas other perspectives are not taken into account. Furthermore, the cities that are being explored cannot be considered representative of the great diversity in European cities. In order to do justice to the multi-faceted and complex nature of the dynamics of urban conflict and resistance, further research is encouraged to widen the geographical scope, as well as to explore further interest groups, especially those that might suffer from the skater's reclamation of

urban space. Additionally, it is strongly recommended to apply a more intersectional focus in further research. Even though we were able to include women and queer participants in our study on this still cis-male-dominated sport, the limited scope did not allow us to investigate additional power imbalances. The implementation of a more intersectional lens could further contribute to achieving what Lefebvre calls for: A right to the city for everyone.

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