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To cite this article: Duncan McDuie-Ra (2023) Play space in plain sight: the disruptive alliances between street trees and skateboarders, International Journal of Play, 12:3, 285-303, DOI: 10.1080/21594937.2023.2235470

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/21594937.2023.2235470>



Published online: 08 Aug 2023.



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Play space in plain sight: the disruptive alliances between street trees and skateboarders

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ABSTRACT

This article is an ethnographic account of searches for play space in Newcastle, Australia, specifically for skateboarding. Street skateboarding is predicated on unstructured play at ‘found’ spots in the urban landscape assembled from surfaces, objects, and obstacles. Without access to established skateparks during COVID-19 lockdowns, the search for play space became an exciting part of lockdown life, and street trees were surprising guideposts for locating unpredictable surfaces and angles. Through these observations, this article explores the potential of street trees in generating play space through skateboarding, making three arguments. First, street trees are overlooked as potential play space compared to trees living in parks, reserves, and playgrounds. Crucially, street trees generate play space by assembling and re-assembling the urban landscape in unpredictable ways. Second, skateboarders and trees are unexpected allies in unstructured play and the disruption of urban order. Third, street trees produce skate spots by modifying the built environment, challenging ideas of mutually exclusive realms of nature vs. city, grey vs. green, play vs. passivity, and use vs. misuse. These examples may not fit idealised notions of human-tree relations, but they open new possibilities for thinking about these relations and where we seek and find play space.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 2 August 2022
Accepted 15 November 2022

KEYWORDS

Street trees; skateboarding;
play space; infrastructure;
human-tree relations

Introduction

The search for spots is an important part of street skateboarding culture and practice (Snyder, 2017). Different surfaces, and objects – the assemblages skaters refer to as ‘spots’ – become part of localised cartographies of play space. Street skateboarding across the globe thrived in the pandemic (Judge, 2022). With structured play limited, skateboarding appealed to new and former participants because it could be done almost anywhere with a smooth surface, alone or with others, start-up costs are relatively low, and play could be adjusted for social distancing rules. As traumatic as the pandemic is and was, there are positive associations with experiencing urban landscapes stripped back, especially for reinventing play space. As Young writes of Melbourne during lockdowns, ‘[t]he withdrawal of the crowds of commuters, workers and tourists shows us streetscapes and cityscapes in a way that we have never seen before’ (2021, p. 998). Skateboarding had

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a dialectical relationship to lockdowns: the emptier the landscape, the more spots to skate. Empty or partially empty landscapes with fewer obstructions became playgrounds for skateboarders (McDUIE-Ra, 2023). An unexpected feature of empty and near-empty urban landscapes was the visibility of skate spots created by street trees.

Street trees have been part of skateboarding for decades, but usually as marginal spots, visible in moments of improvisation away from the main arena for street skateboarding; steel handrails, granite stairs, concrete curbs, marble ledges.¹ Street trees disrupt the surfaces of the city. Tree roots modify otherwise flat surfaces, creating bumps, wedges, and other unpredictable variations. Branches and leaves provide cover from heat and sun and obscure the view of security guards and cameras allowing for longer skate sessions. The infrastructure built to house trees in newly developed areas of the city generates new skate spots. Animated during the pandemic, street trees open new possibilities for play space in otherwise mundane, empty, urban landscapes.

I will use ‘street trees’ to distinguish from trees growing in parks, reserves, or household plots. Street trees are planted in the pavement (see [Image 2](#)), in infrastructure built around streets and plazas such as planters and landscaped gardens, in designated ‘nature strips’, and in various moveable pots and other containers. Street trees soften the built environment, potentially breaking down divisions between ‘nature’ and ‘culture’, while generating contentious politics around the service and dis-service they bring to local environments (Woudstra & Allen, 2022, pp. 5–7).

In exploring the relationships between street trees and skateboarding I make three arguments. First, street trees tend to be overlooked as potential play space. This is exacerbated when compared to trees living in conventional spaces of recreation such as parks, reserves, and playgrounds where play is encouraged. Street trees have a role in play ‘as trees’, and, most significantly in the present article, in assembling and re-assembling the urban landscape.

Second, skaters and street trees are unexpected allies in unstructured play. Like skateboarders, street trees are disorderly. They both refuse to stay in their designated place. They both mark other surfaces. They both damage infrastructure. They both warrant maintenance and repair. And, crucially for this article, they generate play space together. This goes beyond skateboarding; however, skateboarding is a useful example as a widely practiced form of unstructured play, often preformed in locations that are not designated play spaces, and that relies on creative reinterpretation of existing space to begin with.

Third, alliances between street trees and street skateboarding offer insights into the possibilities of play from seemingly juxtaposed elements of the urban landscape. As play and performance, skateboarding is associated with the built environment: grey materials, hard surfaces (O’Connor et al., 2022). Street trees, on the other hand, signify attempts to conserve or introduce ‘nature’, to soften the built environment, to control movement and behaviour, to balance grey with green. Focusing on their entanglement allows us to see new possibilities for play outside the binaries of nature vs. city, green vs. grey, passive recreation vs. active play, and use vs. misuse.

The remainder of the article is divided into five sections. The following section gives an outline of the research methodology. The second section engages literature on skate spots as assemblages of surfaces, objects and obstacles and their appeal for unstructured play. The third section discusses street trees and their presence in assemblages of play space. The fourth section outlines three observations from rolling ethnography on

street trees as play space. The article's conclusion offers additional thoughts on discovering play space in plain sight.

Methodology – rolling ethnography

Research for this paper was carried out during 2020 and 2021 in Newcastle, NSW (Australia). Initially, the ethnographic explorations described here were attempts to recover unstructured play during lockdowns and the months in-between. NSW experienced two strict COVID-19 lockdowns; the first prior to vaccine development (early-mid 2020–52 days) and the second following the Delta outbreak (mid-late 2021–107 days). During periods of full lockdown (159 days total) schools, universities, colleges, non-essential businesses were closed, public transport was drastically reduced, visits between households limited, and interstate and overseas travel halted. Even as lockdown rules eased, schools, universities and colleges remained closed for different periods, limits on capacity inside buildings were instated, opening hours were limited, and distancing measures were in place. The NSW Government allowed residents to exercise outdoors during lockdowns provided distancing measures were observed. Determining what kinds of activity constituted exercise was difficult for both residents and authorities. Some of the activities described in this article violated the confusing rules imposed by the NSW Government around outdoor activities, sometimes unknowingly and sometimes knowingly.

Lockdowns allowed for consideration of the immediate sub/urban environment, suddenly operating at a reduced volume, the so-called 'anthro-pause' (see Gibbs, 2022; Searle et al., 2021). Like many other researchers, I turned my ethnographic gaze towards my own neighbourhood and surrounds, my own experiences, and shared experiences with a relatively small universe living, working, and playing in a small geographic range (Brownell, 2022). However, I was also determined to 'get out' and skate, on my own and with my daughter, in the 'street playground' (Wheway, 2015) at our doorstep, applying the salve of unstructured play to overburdened mental and physical health. Finding skate spots in the streets became an exciting part of lockdown life – mixing care, play, and urban exploration, increasing the time we spent playing together, evoking recent research on play during the pandemic and beyond (see Clark, 2021; Collins, 2022). COVID-19 was a catalyst for thinking about play space in different ways, with life on pause, but these ways of thinking persist as restrictions ease, a theme discussed in the conclusion.

I utilised rolling ethnography during this period. Rolling ethnography is a way of approaching urban space on a skateboard, rolling along wheels uncovering surface, tension, topography, and leading to encounters with both human and non-human actants (McDuie-Ra, 2021a, pp. 41–42). For me, rolling ethnography is autoethnographic in that it is 'close to, or part of, a particular lifeworld' (Moors, 2017, p. 387). I claim no objectivity in this exploration of street space. I think skateboarding is valuable, vibrant, and disproportionately punished. It has been a major part of my identity, my familial and social relationships, and my ways of approaching material space. As with other everyday ethnographic techniques, I engaged in the act for decades before I considered it had any value or legitimacy as research. Rolling ethnography is like walking ethnography, the practice of conducting ethnographic research on foot enabling unintended encounters with objects, people, and spaces (Yi'En, 2014). However, when undertaking rolling

ethnography, the condition of surfaces is a determinant of where one's body and board can go. Furthermore, the gaze one utilises to scan the landscape is focused on the potential for skateboarding, steering the researcher (and accompanying family in this case) to possible play space.

Rolling ethnography can also be shared by rolling with others and paying attention to the surfaces and spaces discovered, skating them, touching them, talking about them, photographing them. In this research I spent a lot of time discovering and trying out spots with my daughter. Our time exploring these spots was rich and memorable (see Adams & Manning, 2015), but not the focus of analysis here. I mention her presence to give readers a sense of how we were inhabited the landscape, a duo of skateboarders spanning generations, gender, and race; not the imagined crew of late-teen male miscreants that often spring to the minds of readers (and peer-reviewers) when skateboarding is mentioned despite voluminous research destabilising these stereotypes (see below). Rolling ethnography produces very specific descriptions of the surfaces of the built environment, bodily feats (tricks) attempted on these surfaces, and wounding of bodies in the process. Limitations come in sharing these descriptions outside the subculture, and thus I have toned down these descriptions to assist readability in this article. I recorded these moments as observational vignettes and photographs. I have withheld the street names of the spots lest descriptions of unruly activity have consequences for spots, skaters, or trees. As this research took shape, I spent time discussing street tree spots we encountered with other skaters who have lived in the city for much longer, uncovering a world of memories of past tree spots, references to tree spots in videos and photographs published in magazines, and sharing information on new spots that have emerged.

Skateboarding and street play

At its core, skateboarding involves the appropriation of, and damage to, urban objects in the pursuit of play. In *Play Matters*, Sicart writes that play 'is a way of being in the world, like languages, thought, faith, reason, and myth' (2014, p. 3). This is an apt description of skateboarding, which has some components that cross-over into organised sports, such as competitions and specialised spaces (skateparks), yet is overwhelmingly 'a way of being in the world' and a global way of being at that (Borden, 2019). O'Connor argues convincingly that skateboarding can be considered a religion, 'a central and meaningful motif in the lives of countless individuals who have committed years and sometimes decades to this demanding, difficult and sometimes dangerous pastime' (2020, p. 2). Skateboarding is play that transgresses life stages, location, gender, race, and class (Carr, 2017; O'Connor, 2018; Williams, 2020; Willing et al., 2019), usually reflecting existing levels of diversity in the local community. In a general sense, as Borden argues, diverse racial and ethnic groups are 'more easily integrated into skateboarding than in many other areas of youth culture' (2001, p. 140). Skateboarding has a long history of female, non-binary, and gender-queer participation (see Beal & Wilson, 2004; Fok & O'Connor, 2021). However, skate culture can also be exclusionary and hierarchical (Dupont, 2014); though the boundaries of inclusion and exclusion shift over time and place and many accounts of exclusion tend to be dated. What remains steadfast amongst skaters of different backgrounds and locations is a shared desire for improvised play in the streets.

Skaters covet the assemblages of surfaces, objects and obstacles with very particular material properties that allow – and progress – the performance of skate tricks. Handrails, ledges, blocks, fences, street furniture, embankments, access ramp, stairs, and, of course, trees generate the surfaces skaters desire depending on how they are arranged. These assemblages are called ‘spots’ in skate culture. Spots are not intended for skateboarding; they are accidents of urban planning (Snyder, 2017, pp. 68–69). Searching for spots is part of the playfulness of skate culture. Spots are rendered visible through the ‘skater gaze’ (Borden, 2001; McDuie-Ra, 2021a, pp. 33–34; Vivoni, 2009). The skater gaze is attuned to the possibilities for play from otherwise mundane assemblages through constant reinterpretation, a common focal point in research on street play more generally (Holt et al., 2015). And while the assemblages desired with this gaze are particular to skaters, this desire is shared by skaters across time and space. In research published while the present article was in production, O’Connor et al. (2022) argue convincingly that street skateboarding takes place in ‘grey space’ for leisure, as distinct from blue (sea) and green (trees/plants) spaces commonly analysed. For O’Connor et al, grey space demonstrates the ways ‘skateboarders must work with the materialities of pollution’ (2022, p. 2). In the present article grey and green blend at the edges of ‘polluted leisure’, adding further twists to the chromatics of outdoor space.

Street skateboarding draws attention to play outside designated play spaces and to the ‘tangled world of people, things, spaces, and cultures’ where play happens (Sicart, 2014, p. 6). Mischief is central to skateboarding culture and distinguishes the core of skateboarding from organised sports (see McDuie-Ra, 2021b, pp. 80–97). Street skateboarding shreds surfaces, grinding down the edges of street objects. Many skateboard tricks involve shredding, and over time shredding changes the form and appearance of surfaces like concrete, marble, timber, and granite. Skaters modify angled surfaces with wax, resin,



Image 1. Concrete ledge marked with wax and worn down by skateboarders ‘shredding’ the surface. Photo: author.

and paint to make them easier to slide or grind with parts of the skateboard leaving a trail (Vivoni, 2009); see [Image 1](#). As such, creative destruction is a fundamental element of skateboarding as play, complicating its presence in street space. Returning to Sicart, '[p]lay is also an activity in tension between creation and destruction. Play is always dangerous, dabbling with risks, creating, and destroying, and keeping a careful balance between both' (2014, p. 9).

Street trees

Trees are considered vital to cities, especially as imaginations of cities shift from the antithesis of nature to ecosystems constituent of, and produced by, human and more-than-human actants (Braun, 2005, p. 635). A relational focus unsettles the 'anthropocentric city founded on ontological binaries (humans/non-humans; organic/artificial; living/non-living; wild/tame)' (Steele et al., 2019, p. 415 – brackets in original). Relational ontologies have brought inter-species encounters into the centre of analysis in a range of fields, though plants have received less attention than other species (Head et al., 2014; Jones, 2021; Jones & Cloke, 2002; Lorimer & Davies, 2010). Taking up the under-representation of plants, Phillips and Atchison advocate for 'bringing more-than-human geographies into conversation with urban green space research' (2020, p. 157). Recent scholarship on trees in urban and suburban spaces has called for greater attention to everyday encounters and 'the embodied relations between people and trees' (Jones & Instone, 2016, p. 442) to 'construct an urban ecological imaginary that understands cities as diverse assemblages of human and non-human matter' (Millington, 2013, p. 280).

Street trees are part of these diverse assemblages. A tree growing out of a carefully cut hole in a concrete and granite pathway is an easily identifiable example; see [Image 2](#). Street trees are proliferating through greening strategies in some contexts, such as Los Angeles or Warsaw (Hrckova, 2021; McPherson et al., 2011), disappearing in others, such as Bangalore (Nagendra & Gopal, 2010), and transcending human/nature binaries in others, such as being granted individual identities (and email addresses) in Melbourne (Phillips & Atchison, 2020). Scholarly attention to street trees focuses on use-value (oxygen, temperature control, aesthetics, property value etc), conflicts, management, gentrification, and the experience of trees in everyday life (for an excellent summary see Cooke, 2020). However, there has been limited attention to their potential as play space beyond their attraction 'as trees', whether for leisure (sitting underneath, for example) or expected play (climbing, for example). Street trees also generate unexpected play. In this case, street trees are generators of play space as part of assemblages with other street objects and surfaces.

Trees living in street space provoke complicated human responses because they are desired by some – for shade, temperature control, aesthetics, and opposed by others – debris, root damage, interfering with other infrastructure (pipes, cables, and wires) and blocking views/light. Street trees live with a tenuous hold on their place amidst the concrete and play further distorts their presence. Is play with street trees acceptable use or misuse? There is no clear answer because play with street trees is difficult to correlate to a particular environmental worldview. Leisure, sitting under the shade of a tree for example, suggests human appreciation of trees and can connect to established ideas about virtuous human-nature relations. Play is more complicated.



Image 2. Newly planted street trees growing out of a granite pathway. Photo: author.

For starters, street trees aren't planted to play with, so residents and authorities can get irritated when they're appropriated as play space. Further, it is not apparent whether trees are being appreciated or denigrated during moments of play.

Street trees challenge urban order by growing in ways they are not supposed to, in places they are not supposed to, and by modifying other elements, from cracking pavements to leaving debris to inviting other species to live, love and excrete. Thus, street trees might be planned or unplanned, obedient or unruly, cared for or neglected; the key for this article is that they contribute to skate spots, the zenith of play space for street skateboarders. As cartographies of play shrank, geographically, during the COVID-19 pandemic, street trees and associated infrastructure took on even more

significance as play space, and attention to their ludic potential is timely as reconsideration of what kinds of play, what kinds of mobility, are possible and acceptable in urban environments emerging from the pandemic.

Skateboarding may seem like an unlikely practice to weave together street space, street trees, and play. As O'Connor et al. argue (2022), skateboarding is associated with grey landscapes – concrete in particular – more than green. As discussed above, it is often viewed as destructive rather than creative. Authorities and property owners go to great lengths to deter skateboarding through defensive architecture and other surveillance practices (McDuie-Ra & Campbell, 2022; Smith & Walters, 2018). In Newcastle, as in many other cities, the proliferation of defensive architecture on desirable surfaces forces skateboarders to search for new play space. Restrictions on movement during the pandemic intensified these searches in smaller geographic areas, uncovering spots that might otherwise have been overlooked, as will be seen in the following section. Further, many of the newly built street spaces in Newcastle integrate trees and plants in different ways, ushering skateboarders towards these assemblages in ways unintended by designers and planners.

The destructive label extends to the equipment itself. Skateboards are made from trees. The wooden part of a skateboard, the deck, is made from seven layers of thin timber (originally maple, but now various timbers are used). Skaters go through decks rapidly, depending on the how often they skate, and the force of the tricks attempted. As skateboarding spreads globally to tens of millions of participants, the demand for timber, not to mention the logistics of manufacture and supply, hardly educe a 'green' industry.

However, by searching out play space and participating in rolling ethnography, I contend that skateboarding is a creative and productive way to think through the possibilities for play from assemblages of trees and concrete, green and grey space, and the various imperfections these assemblages introduce to planned space. Skateboarding is one way, and certainly not the only way, to experiment with calls-to-arms in the literature to 'productively explore the roles of temporality, scale, valuation, mobility, and collectively that inflect these human-tree stories, or others that might be told' (Phillips & Atchison, 2021, p. 164). Building on Kelley et al.'s work on youth and urban nature in Tacoma, it is through socio-spatial practice, in this case ludic socio-spatial practice, that nature 'may be simultaneously perceived and experienced in unexpected moments of everyday urban life' (2012, p. 874). The unexpected moments discussed here do not fit established ideas of human-tree relations, but they do tell alternative human-tree stories, with play and mischief at their core, opening new possibilities for what we consider as play space.

Observations on street trees as play space

The following outlines three observations from rolling ethnography on street trees as play space: modification, infrastructure, obstructions.

Modification

Street trees produce skate spots by modifying street space in unpredictable ways. As tree roots search for water underneath concrete, pavers, and asphalt, they push



Image 3. Our local pavement bump. Photo: author.

surfaces in different directions creating uneven angles. For many residents, these modifications are problems (Mullaney et al., 2015). For skateboarders, these modifications make spots. **Image 3** shows the simplest version; an a-frame bump in the middle of the pavement. The tree alongside the pavement has pushed the concrete slabs upward, making an exciting disruption to the otherwise flat and predictable surface. The concrete slab on one side of the root has been replaced at some point, it's smoother than the coarser concrete slabs along the roll up varying resistance to skateboard wheels. The angle of the spot is perfect for launching tricks into the air and landing on the pavement beyond the bump, or rolling up, doing a trick at the top, and going back down the same side. This spot resembled an almost identical assemblage I used to skate deep in suburban Sydney in my teenage years, reawakening my gaze for unpredictable surface modifications. Spots like are exciting play spaces because the surfaces of the street are constantly changing. Even over the months we skated here, the joining crack between slabs at the base of the a-frame deepened as the edge of the slab sunk into the ground. We came to this spot often during home-schooling because it was just a few minutes roll away from home; we could have a session during recess or lunch.

Trees modify surfaces faster than authorities can repair them, though repair work can modify spots in desirable ways too. **Image 4** shows a spot where a maple tree (*aceraceae*) has modified the pavement by raising the surface. The council has repaired the pavement with asphalt, making the surface of the bump smooth, and making it easier to grind or slide the handrail angled down the hill. Skateboarders call this a 'bump-to-rail'. There are new cracks forming in the asphalt as the roots continue to modify the surface. A closer look at the surfaces of the spot at the bottom of the image show that skaters have used bondo, a fast-drying bonding agent, and gaffer tape to smooth over the roll up to the bump, showing that the spot is in use. This spot is a great example of how street trees are part of assemblages of



Image 4. Bump-to-rail. Photo: author.

other surfaces (asphalt, concrete, bricks), objects (steel handrail), and obstacles (rough ground, steep incline) that generate exciting and challenging play space. Remove the tree, and its capacity to modify the surfaces, and the spot would no longer be desirable. This spot requires skill and daring to skate, and aside from rolling over the bump a few times, we decided that appreciation was a more sensible strategy.

In a similar way, the spot featured in [Image 5](#), is assembled from the same species of maple. The roots have raised the brick pavers like a wave across the entire width of the pavement. The spot was featured in the skateboard video *Scenic* (Brinsdon, 2021) for the US-base Spitfire wheel company in a line performed by Rowan Davis filmed during lockdown. Davis begins by kickflipping² from a building entranceway over a set of two stairs and onto the pavement (06:59). Now rolling at speed down the slope he adjusts his feet, rolls over one root-bump, and then launches off the second, bigger bump ([Image 5](#)) and executes a backside big-spin³ high in the air (07:03). Davis keeps rolling around the corner, onto a granite pavement, ollies onto the marble ledge adjacent to the pavement – part of a commercial building – and performs a switch-front-side nose-slide⁴ (07:08) and ends with a fake tre-flip⁵ (07:11), before rolling onto the road. Davis' line is world-class. The tree-root bump is the focal point of the assemblage, tying together two streets as a single play space. And because the video received a global audience through the *Thrasher* media platform, this unruly tree has a parallel subcultural existence, a double-life as famous play space oblivious to the people passing it daily or tasked with repairing the modifications the tree makes to the pavement.

Infrastructure

Street trees necessitate infrastructure: holes sunk in the pavement, raised garden beds hemmed by ledges and curbs, landscaped gardens separating stairways and paths, atop



Image 5. Wave bump featured in Scenic (Brinsdon, 2021). Note the skate-stoppers on the marble ledge on the left of the frame. Photo: author.

walls and embankments, and between different levels and layers of other hard surfaces. Street trees, therefore, are entangled with the same objects and obstacles that draw skaters. At these spots, skaters are not drawn by the modifications to other surfaces created by street trees as in the previous examples. Instead, they are skating objects and surfaces built to give trees a place to live, to enable or preserve urban greening. No trees, no infrastructure, no spots, no play.

Image 6 is taken from a plaza in central Newcastle completed prior to the 2021 lockdown. The plaza is assembled from elements of an old train station, re-landscaped with trees and gardens among remnants of the station and shops in the old buildings. Banners installed on the lamp posts read: ‘Shop’ and ‘Play’. During lockdowns the plaza attracted skateboarders because the large open space allowed for distancing from one another while keeping the feeling of skating together. Still, the plaza features skate-stoppers on most of the surfaces and pre-cut grooves in others to deter skaters (despite the invitation to ‘play’). Skaters had to think creatively to find exciting play space within the plaza.

Image 6 shows an assemblage skaters call an ‘out ledge’; a ledge that extends out from a flat surface in the direction of another surface usually at a lower level. The spot here has been created by the concrete edges of a raised garden bed, one of seven similar garden beds along the side of the plaza housing young trees. A coating of wax and clear sealant applied by skaters is visible on the top and side edge of the concrete to assist sliding and grinding along the ledge. Skateboarders have plugged the pre-cut grooves



Image 6. Out ledge. Photo: author.

with bondo to level the surface. On reaching the end of the ledge, skaters must clear another patch of garden at high speed to land on the lower pavement. The spot is very challenging, making it exciting.

Closer to home, there is a curb spot between a vocational training institute and a wide drainage canal/creek under the shade of mature Morten Bay Fig trees (*ficus macrophylla*).

The road has been in this location for decades, used by water utility workers. Just prior to the 2021 lockdown the road was resurfaced and upgraded with new curbs beneath the trees, perfect for skateboarding. The thick branches of the trees hang out over the curbs and make good vantage points to watch and film skateboarding happening below, and kids skating at the spot often take timeout and climb up into the trees. The road is not open to through traffic, making it possible to skate without interruption in the daylight hours. Users take good care of the surfaces: sweeping and raking the ground; keeping the curbs slick with wax and clear paint, plugging gaps with bondo and other synthetic fillers; clearing away rubbish. Curbs draw skaters of different skill levels, as appealing to beginners and the highly skilled. With limited options during COVID-19 lockdowns, the curbs under the trees became a gathering space for local skaters of all ages and different genders, mixing play space and social space. While most of this was within the rules around exercise and outdoors meetings at the time, interpretations of these rules by authorities varied, and the trees provided cover allowing skaters to relax and play without having to keep track of the latest, often confusing, rules. For us the curbs under the trees were our only social space during lockdown; the opportunity to share moments of play with others even if distanced.⁶

The branches also drop debris. Morten Bay Fig trees drop leaves year-round and small figs in the warmer months. The figs are trampled underfoot and rolled smooth by skateboard wheels. Wind and rain make the crushed figs into a paste that is very difficult to remove (Image 7). Skateboarders have stashed brooms in the



Image 7. The curb spot after a storm and before a group clean-up. Photo: author.

branches of the trees to clean the spot. The cleaning and care bring a ritualistic element to the spot. This makes it feel as if the play space has been earned; something akin to a community garden.

Obstructions

Throughout the months spent rolling around looking for spots it was clear that the prospects are far more limited in up-scale and gentrifying areas. As many scholars have pointed out, there is a strong correlation between urban greening, security, and gentrification; attempts to up-scale neighbourhoods often involve extensive planting of street trees and redesigning existing green spaces (Anguelovski et al., 2019; Despard, 2012; Dooling, 2009; Quastel, 2009). Kocisky calls for research that can ‘resist framing green-space as fixed, but as sites of ongoing controversy and resistance’ (2022, p. 14). Gentrification has a complex relationship to skateboarding, and controversy and resistance certainly feature. On the one hand, gentrification results in new assemblages from the objects, surfaces and obstacles created or upgraded. Indeed, many of the spots created by tree infrastructure in Newcastle are beautification projects adjacent to – and interacting with – gentrification of the city (Munzner & Shaw, 2015). On the other hand, these spots are usually more heavily surveilled, policed, and appropriation for play cast as ‘out-of-place’.

Image 8 shows a series of handrails from the foyer of a newly opened five-star hotel in Newcastle. The spot was previously an administrative building for the local council and



Image 8. Trees as beautification and obstruction. Photo: author.

the plaza in front of the building and the stairs were established skate spots in Newcastle in the 1990s. Refurbishments for the hotel took place during the pandemic, and in the in-between period before the hotel was opened the handrails and other surfaces of the new building proved tempting to skaters. Once opened, trees were installed in enormous pots that are impossible to shift by hand, blocking access to the handrails and thwarting attempts at play.

In other parts of the city, new street trees have replaced street furniture and other obstacles coveted by skateboarders. Street furniture, especially benches, have a long history in skate culture, and popular spots might attract scores of skaters on any one day. As Pellegrini and Baudry note in their research on street trees in Paris and Montpellier, street trees and plants are ‘tools to manage streets, to beautify the neighbourhood and to encourage street users to be mostly passers-by or transient users’ (2014, p. 875). For residents, street trees ‘restrict public behaviour they deem inappropriate, such as ball games, loitering, sleeping, urinating, and littering’ (2014, p. 875). Replacing benches and other objects with trees also discourages appropriation and play. Still, green gentrification doesn’t close the streets to play completely. While each hard object replaced by a tree does diminish the potential pool of spots, skaters improvise and adapt, defying order through play, often in alliance with the very trees planted to tame street space.

Conclusion

The pandemic was a catalytic, yet temporary, disruption to the flows and volume of urban life, exposing surfaces of urban landscapes to reinterpretation. The overall affect was attuning a new generation of skateboarders, and reattuning an older generation, to the spots generated from juxtaposed aesthetics; green and grey, soft and hard, natural and built, nurturing and brutal. As the pandemic abates, these spots remain at

the edges of urban order, animated by playful appropriation and creative performance, but otherwise unremarkable to passers-by. This tentative exploration is based on one specific, though widely shared, perspective on play space, skateboarding. Street trees, the modifications they make to other surfaces, the debris they drop, the shade they provide, the voids they leave behind, the infrastructure that supports them, and the objects they replace are integral to the assemblages that draw skaters for play. Skaters search for this kind of play space globally; in Newcastle, in Los Angeles, in Paris, in Chennai, in Shenzhen (McDuie-Ra, 2022, 2023). Even in areas with no street trees, their absence is felt; there's no shade, no cover, and less street-level infrastructure to generate spots to skate.

The trees explored in this article are entangled with everyday urban infrastructure and hold possibilities for play as, and beyond, their attraction as trees. Street trees and street skaters share unexpected, though intricate, relationships. Attention to these relationships reveals possibilities for trees as play space in plain sight, outside conventional spaces of recreation such as parks, reserves, and playgrounds. These are far from idealised human-tree relationships where trees provide respite to humans from the alienation of urban life.

Trees and skaters can be temporary or long-term allies in mischievous play. Skaters spend hours each week, over many years, even decades, in the presence of street trees. Varied, and even contradictory, relationships with nature are fostered in these periods. Skaters take care of street trees, they damage them, they leave traces on them, they trim and prune them, they sweep up the debris they drop, they notice and mourn their loss. Trees modify other surfaces; twisting concrete, raising pavers and bricks, changing the angle of walls and embankments. They give shade and cover. They give the urban landscape the unpredictability that skaters covet. In this way they epitomise, imperfectly and contradictorily, a version of the 'mutual flourishing for people, plants, and other nonhumans in the city' (Jones & Instone, 2016, p. 443) craved by advocates of relational ontologies of inter-species entanglements; and they do so outside the boundaries of management, order, and respectable behaviour. Their entanglement is deepened by other agents, public and private developers finance infrastructure and landscaping for trees, creating thousands of skate spots that would not exist without trees, and in turn, would not be spots without skaters.

Notes

1. Korean-American professional skater Daewon Song is the most celebrated improviser of tree spots in his prolific career. Song discusses street trees in an interview for the *Chrome Ball Incident*. See Swisher, (2013).
2. Board flips one revolution in the air while the skater stays in the same direction above it before catching the board with their feet and landing on the ground.
3. Board spins 360 degrees in the air while the skater turns their body 180s degrees before catching the board with their feet and landing on the ground.
4. Sliding along a surface with the front wooden end of the board. In this case 'switch' means leading with the opposite foot to usual or regular stance.
5. Board spins 360 degrees and flips one revolution in the air while the skater stays in the same direction above it before catching the board with their feet and landing on the ground. Davis complicates this trick by doing it backwards, or 'fakie'.
6. A photo feature of this spot, including photos of us, appears in the Newcastle skate magazine *Sprawlers*. See Turvey (2022).

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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