



## Research note

# The Experience of Teenagers at Marseilles' Skate Park

## Emergence and Evaluation of an Urban Sports Site

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Away from the traditional sports activities organized by sports organizations in conventional facilities, a new form of fun leisure is developing outside formal institutions. The growing importance of these “informal sports activities” has led local representatives to think about building new facilities that will be available for all (roller-blading tracks, skate parks, *etc*). This paper promotes evaluation procedures for these new types of recreational area which may guide future investment decisions in urban leisure. Social science methodology, and especially that of comprehensive interpretation, is applied to the study of a skate park in Marseilles, France. Comparison of the data obtained from methodical observation of the skate park with data gathered from interviews of the users, makes it possible to draw a picture of the way this space is perceived. The approach used (1) considers that reality lies in the meaning of our experience and therefore (2) considers space from the users' perspective or experience. The qualitative results obtained show that the skate park is a highly sensitive space where the practice of skateboarding is organized around shared esthetic values. The paper argues that in order for city officials to be able to monitor effectively the trends in usage of these types of facility, a comprehensive approach to observation and analysis, such as that described here, will be essential. © 2001 Elsevier Science Ltd. All rights reserved.

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## Introduction

Nowadays there are two ways of enjoying a physical activity, as formal sport or as leisure: one joins an association that provides facilities and coaching for a fee, or one participates in informal sports, alone or with friends and family, outside organizations. These two modes of leisure are fundamentally different. Institutionalized sporting practice takes place in a social

context with rules and in precisely standardized spaces. The logic of competition and progress is predominant. In the case of informal sporting activities, the most important thing is living and sharing intense moments. Informal sport is thus attracting the attention of political leaders. Their awareness of this issue, and the fact that an alternative view of sport also includes informal activities, coincides with public opinion. Such a conception is linked to the place occupied by non-institutionalized sports practices. These activities have become so fashionable

that one can say that the growth in numbers of sports participants currently observed is essentially due to the increase in the number of people involved in sport outside the traditional structures, *ie* those who are not members of clubs or associations (Zouari, 1998). Several surveys have shown that about 45–60% of the French population now practice informal sports activities (CSA, 1997; BVA, 1997; EVAL, 1994). Sporting and leisurely physical practices are expanding on multiple sites, sometimes designed for the activity, sometimes not (*eg* in the case

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of an area undergoing re-zoning: Bach, 1992, p 282). Examples of sports reappearing in cities are numerous. These include playing soccer in informal spaces at the foot of apartment buildings, jogging in green spaces, skating in downtown areas (Flusty, 2000) or even family roller-skating on the city pavements. This extension of sport activity, which puts a growing pressure on local authorities, represents a potential improvement in the quality of urban life. As representatives of the population, the leaders of voluntary associations are trying to propose new types and forms of recreation and exercise. At the same time they are looking for appropriate open spaces that are open to all. The extension and transformation of sporting leisure is also accompanied by demographic development and urbanization. Informal urban recreation has developed concomitantly with the growth of cities in France. Throughout the 20th century the city landscape has been expanding significantly. French cities occupied 36 516 km<sup>2</sup> in 1936 and 100 041 km<sup>2</sup> in 1999. While 52.9% of the population was living in cities in 1936, this percentage reached 75.5% in 1999 (Chavouet and Fanouillet, 2000). During the last 10 years, there has been a significant concentration of the population in city centers with a concomitant loss of population in suburbs.

At a national level, the emergence of informal sport activities has been a matter of concern for the French sports establishment. Sports federations, whose numbers of members have remained stagnant, have launched an advertising campaign aimed at recruiting youngsters. The broadcast slogan ("Sport is better in a club") can be considered as an indication of their concern. As far as local policies are concerned, the situation has led city mayors to undertake two types of action in regard to sports space planning. The first consists of providing traditional facilities geared towards formal and high-level sports, therefore improving the image of the city, as well as building or confirming its reputation, without losing sight of the economic consequences of such investment. The second forces city representatives to answer the population's growing demands for new facilities for the prac-

tice of informal sport. Marseilles, the largest city in the south of France, is no exception to this national trend. The mutation of the sports phenomenon has recently been a key influence on local spatial planning policies in Marseilles, whose Mayor claims to have "elaborated a new facilities project, namely roller-skating paths and neighborhood playgrounds" (Raoult and Bonneau, 1999, p 3). In support of this approach, it is essential to understand how and why a sports site is used, and to determine the types of human activity that occupy it.

The survey presented here is centered upon a municipal sports ground focusing on the practice of "sports which involve gliding or sliding" (*ie* the Marseilles' skate park). Our task, like that of Di Méo (1999), consisted of taking into consideration and understanding two dimensions of space: (1) a "social space" – closely linked to the concrete relationships between individuals, groups and space – and objectively analyzed by geographers or anthropologists, and (2) a "perceived space" which, on the contrary, refers to the subjective relationship that individuals or groups have with the site. Such perception is full of sensations and marked by pleasure and displeasure (Moles and Rohmer, 1982). A proper investigation of these two dimensions requires first a methodical observation of the activities and of the locations where they occur, and then a comparison of the data collected with those gathered by interviewing the users. The production of these two types of data and their comparison will help to describe the space as it is experienced. The main advantage of this description is that it allows insights into uses that were not foreseen by the designers, and which deviate from the accepted use. The aim of this approach is to develop evaluation procedures for urban recreational facilities to provide important insights which may guide future investment in urban leisure.

## Methods

In order to evaluate and identify the recreational potential of a space, some authors refer to theoretical frames of environmental psychology (Bloch and Laursen, 1996; Kliskey, 2000), while

others test landscape ecology and geomorphology (Fjørtoft and Sageie, 2000). These two groups tend to work from map analysis, using quantitative measures of usage. We are approaching this question in another way. We want to grasp the human use of space by determining the form under which social life becomes an empirical reality (a body) (Simmel, 1895). The sites are then understood according to lived and shared experience, and how their use is presented and justified by the people involved. These methods, originating from social sciences, are often used for the investigation of interactions. For example, inter-racial relationships of young urban playground users have been analyzed by Gobster (1998) by means of naturalist and then participant observation. In such studies, conclusions are drawn from the perception and experience of space. The use of filmed sequences and photographic images can enrich the questions submitted to the subjects and the observation of their attitudes, movements and interactions. This is how Whyte (1980) presented the utilization of urban spaces and their vitality, and provided the city planners and architects with ready-to-use data. For example, from the list of common characteristics of the most-used places, Whyte assists the planners by providing the necessary elements for the success of this type of site. Thus, social sciences methodology and especially that of comprehensive interpretation, seems particularly relevant in developing an understanding of how the inhabitants of Marseilles use their skate park. These methods are not based on a pessimistic and critical preconception of the sense of activities (Roussel and Griffet, 2000) but, on the contrary, they consider that reality lies in the meaning for us of our own experiences. The sense of experience is reinforced by coupling the observation methods with interviews (Low, 1997). The combining of the users' statements with the observation of their activities provides a more developed picture of the lived experience of the teenagers using the Marseilles' skate park. The methodology used in our work is summarized in Table 1.

**Table 1** Suggestion for the evaluation methodology of a sports ground

Stage	Procedures	Objectives	
Introductory stage	Documentation research and interviews with local representatives	Grasping the socio-historical conditions of the site's emergence, knowing the behaviours expected on this space	Understanding the space from the experience
Stage 1	Informal visits to the sites	Getting the users to know you, finding some preferred informers	"
	Naturalist, systematic observations	Finding out the number of users, specifying the periods and measuring the duration of the activity	
	Participant observations and questionnaires	Establishing a schedule of the site's real utilisation Getting to know, through a simplified questionnaire, the site's regulars, their characteristics (social class, age, origins, etc), their motives Taking part in the groups' activities The observation, coupled with the interview, reveals the intentions	
Stage 2 <sup>a</sup>	Interviews	Recording the justifications for the ways the space is used	"
Stage 3	Comparison of the data collected through observation with that gathered via the interviews	Relating what is said to what is actually done	"

<sup>a</sup>Stages 1 and 2 are dealt with separately for the table to be clear. In reality, they take place simultaneously

## Results and discussion

### *Location of the leisure site*

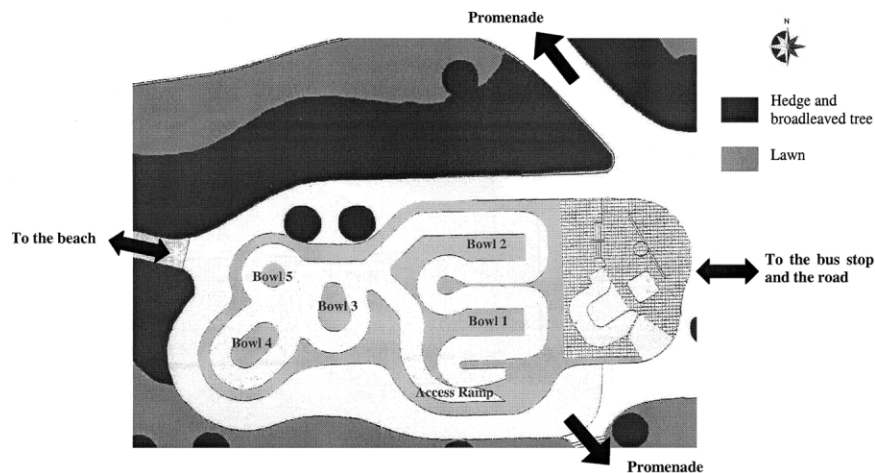
Marseilles is a coastal city in the Provence-Alpes-Côte d'Azur region which, from the early stages, has managed to benefit from the possibilities offered by its geographical location. In 1967, the Mayor of the time expressed an intention to launch a project that consisted of creating a large sea-side resort area, aimed at using the potential of the coast for leisure purposes. During the development of the coastline, young people from Marseilles started to skate on the pipelines resting on the lawns. *"Too bad if the presence of youngsters does not please everyone. Anyway, we will not leave the seaside"*, one of the pioneers claimed at the time in a newspaper article. The city council, faced with the stubbornness of the sports participants, set up a skating slope – a metallic structure resting on the ground, covered with a curved track – then built the skate park at the end of the 1980s (Fig. 1). Today, this place is a real success. The sea nearby also represents a major bonus. It is known that the presence of water, the simple possibility of seeing and smelling it attracts city residents. This obser-

vation, expressed by Whyte (1980), is valid for many forms of water, ponds, fountains and any water pool created in an urban zone, as well as the natural space represented by the sea. During hot summer periods, the close vicinity of the beach enables the youngsters to alternate between acrobatics and bathing: *"it's great in the summer, we can have a swim whenever we want, without losing time"* (F.17). The presence of the sea is not only functional, it also provides a grandiose background – in the users' words "the scenery", "the atmosphere" provide an important context within which the practice can take place. The participants can also take breaks on the lawns close to the concrete bowl. The grassed area that attracts most people is situated on the south west border of the skate park, on the slope of a 10-meter-high hill. From the top of this mound one can see all of Marseilles' harbor. The green fringes are interspersed with leafy trees giving shade and freshness in the summer (essential in the Mediterranean context), as well as protection from the wind during colder periods thanks to dense clumps of hedges. These areas are regularly invaded by the "rolling"

fanatics. They rest there and, if they are youngsters, accompanying parents can keep an eye on their children in comfort. A great number of spectators take advantage of this space to admire the participants' feats. Self-presentation in public places constitutes one of the strongest motives for the youngsters. Skateboarding and roller-skating take on an extra significance with the audience's presence: *"I am really pleased when I do beautiful things, people watch me, people are happy. people say 'yeah, that's great, he's good'. People watch as if this was a show, and that's great"* (M.14). The skate park is situated next to the road, along the sea shore. A bus stop is situated in front of the west entrance. One can also access the skate park via three other points of entry (north, east, south). The entry to the east leads one directly to the beach, the north and south entries represent the main pedestrian path that borders on this space (Fig. 2). Thus strollers who decide to walk the main path of the large sea-side park always walk along the front of the skate park. Rarely insensitive to the players' performance, they stop in front of the pit and actively participate in the life of the place. This



**Figure 1** The skate park, its users and spectators



**Figure 2** Map of the skate park

“self-congestion” process (Whyte, 1980, p 22) further increases the site’s popularity.

#### *Attendance and utilization of the playground*

The quest for a recreational experience largely guides skateboard and roller-blade enthusiasts. Without a doubt, this municipal facility is perfectly adapted to the sport. “*The best park in France*”, that is how the young people from Mar-

seilles qualify their description of the “gliding garden”. However, a major criticism has emerged, which is the over-crowding of the site: “*There you are, I am not going to the park anymore, because there are too many kids*”. The youngest and the least experienced of the participants concentrate there on Wednesdays, Saturdays and Sundays, while the more able avoid these in order to congregate with fellow older and more accomplished per-

formers, often in the evenings. There, the community of “riders” – the “rolling” addicts like defining themselves as such – meet up just as “*in the good old times*”, when “gliding” was less widespread, when the young generation did not invade the playground (Fig. 3). These passionate “tribe members” do not present themselves to an on-looker as a unified group. According to the data collected for this research, the “riders” distinguish themselves in



**Figure 3** The tag as a form of space awareness. During the times when the youngest ones were not able to participate, the older enthusiasts took the opportunity to mark their territory and their membership of the group

terms of the equipment they use. The skateboard users differ from the skaters. Despite claims made by the users, the observation of the bowl shows that they all share the same place at the same time without any real conflict occurring. Although throughout their statements, they seemed to be looking for division, in fact they were sharing the site with little apparent difficulty. They share common values: the game, the “rolling”, respect for the skate park users’ rules, and they are all attracted by a place which favors their sporting practices. A regular skater from the “gliding garden” (M.18) testified to the existence of this context of sensitivity towards the needs of others, representing a world that unites the enthusiasts: *“we all get on very well, we talk, we have fun together. We all [users of skateboards and of skates] actually have more or less the same state of mind”*. Under an apparent uniformity (of young people equipped with wheels) individualist uses of the space are also evident, as well as experiences that differ according to individual sensitivities and level of ability. This is not without important

consequences for the management of this facility. Indeed, following the initiation of the site by a few pioneers, it has subsequently come to be used most by “clumsy” young children who are not yet cognizant of the “rules” for the utilization of this space, followed by specialists. To escape the crowd of novices, the experienced participants adopt two strategies: they either meet up at late hours (with the implications that that can generate: delinquency, non-attendance at school), or they abandon the place and invade other public spaces, squares, parks or streets. K.21 tells us: *“now, I have to go and slide at the sports stadium or at the prefecture”*. The city managers cannot ignore this situation since it is their responsibility to keep an eye on the changing ways in which spaces, building or other public structures are used.

### Design implications

A key finding of our study is that the conditions for the success of a public informal leisure space exist in Marseilles, and what is being done here may also be applied in other contexts. A

park which enables people to sit or lie down, a site where one can pause and which favors interaction (talking) and spectacle (seeing) are necessary conditions for the development of a site with a recreational vocation. Participants and their parents, passers-by and the simply curious represent the different users of the site. The scenery (in this case, the sea) and the resulting atmosphere confer a particular flavor on the place: a place where one can relax, stimulate or be stimulated. The site is ideally located at the heart of a tourist zone which is also particularly enjoyed by the local inhabitants. The facility is situated in a hollow, on the side of a hill. The structure therefore combines intimacy and openness. In the pit, the users are placed in a space reserved for them, a place which naturally catches the onlooker’s eye. If the layout of surrounding paths prompts strollers to stop and watch the young riders’ aerial maneuvers, motorists are also able to catch sight of the show from the road along the coast. The combination of all these conditions render this skate park an attractive place. This success is certainly linked to the

fact that the location of the playground has not been imposed by city planners but chosen by the users themselves.

## Conclusion

Cities are at the heart of an intense leisure activity for young people, who occupy a variety of sites for different purposes, namely: to "hang around", think, talk, play, show off, *etc.* In short cities incorporate zones favoring social interactions with peers and adults. As Lieberg (1995) suggests, we should learn from the city: urban space also possesses multiple properties that facilitate the access to adulthood. Making such uses of the city by young people easier is one of the issues faced by politicians and city planners. Like Bloch and Laursen (1996), we think that research should enrich itself with studies on effective behaviors, *ie* on the way in which practices are organized. However, in contrast to the latter, we favor a sociological survey approach based on listening to participants, and on observing them in everyday settings. This comprehensive approach is adopted in order to improve knowledge of the meaning of their activities, and of the nature of their experience. The methodology presented, which compares the users' statements with the observation of their activities, requires the systematic collection and analysis of high-quality data. Finally, less emphasis is given here to the presentation of results than to the way in which data were obtained. The data presented here are simply illustrative and therefore, by definition limited, but the methodology deserves to be applied to other cases. The space should be looked at like a product (Goossen and Langers, 2000), but as a product shaped and molded by its daily users.

Here, the implications in terms of design and spatial development have been taken into consideration. We have chosen to study a space *a priori* conceived for playing, but this work is part of a wider project that does not confine itself to places exclusively reserved to recreation. This approach is to be extended to focus on mixed zones, targeting various activities (strolling, transit, leisure, rest, *etc.*), which are used in a recreational way.

This brief communication has sought to illustrate how practiced site-based studies can inform approaches to understanding how such spaces are used, and thereby to identify the circumstances in which they may be deemed to have succeeded or failed.

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