

REVIEW

BOOK

Skate/worlds: new pedagogies for skateboarding

Edited by Sander Hölsgens and Adelina Ong

Groningen: University of Groningen Press, 2025, 253 pages

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Skateboarding and the Senses: Skills, Surfaces, and Spaces

Sander Hölsgens and Brian Glenney

London: Routledge, 2024, 90 pages

ISBN: 9781003510642

Open Access book for free download: <https://www.taylorfrancis.com/books/oa-mono/10.4324/9781003510642/>

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New Insights on Studying and Teaching the Social Impact of Skateboarding

The societal impact of skateboarding has been a subject of academic study for over three decades.¹ Two welcome additions to the literature are Open Access titles; both represent scholarship by Sander Hölsgens, an anthropologist and educator of visual ethnography and audiovisual culture at the Leiden Institute of Cultural Anthropology and Development Sociology in the Netherlands.

One of his two new books, *Skate/worlds: New Pedagogies for Skateboarding*, is coedited by Dr. Adelina Ong, who lectures in applied theatre practices at The Royal Central School of Speech and Drama in London. As the book's subtitle implies, it has a more immediate didactic mission than Hölsgens's other concurrent volume, *Skateboarding and the Senses: Skills, Surfaces, and Spaces*, authored with Brian Glenney, who teaches philosophy at Norwich University in Vermont, United States of America.

Although presented with the ardor found in popular instructional manuals and informal memoirs about the sport, *Skate/worlds* finds that skateboarding, which was once seen as an offbeat solitary pursuit, is now considered a socially cohesive activity. Currently, skateboarders include lawyers, social workers, psychologists,

and teachers who strive for a safer, more democratic use of public space.

Given the intellectual interests of some skateboarders, it is unsurprising that academic research on urban play, lifestyle sports, and street art should attempt to understand the activity as a societal phenomenon.

Skateboarding is associated with performance studies, film and media, fine art, pedagogy and education, and the psychology of sport, among other subjects.

In turn, skate scholarship has expanded from examining subcultures and lifestyle sports to encompass phenomenology, critical race theory, performance studies, indigenous studies, anthropology, medicine, law, and philosophy.

In the mid-1990s, skate studies as a discipline was launched with observations that skateboarders see architectural space differently than other city dwellers. Following their priorities, skateboarders analyze urban spaces according to whether they contain skateable surfaces.

By reinterpreting cities, skateboarders read the design principles of the modern city afresh. Instead of remaining a North American and Western European phenomenon, skateboarding has inspired international social skate organizations and communities across Asia and the rest of the world.

Additionally, skateboarders are now concerned with environmental and ethical matters. Sustainability is a subject of interest, with innovations in ethically produced clothing and boards made of renewable materials. Environmentally, skateboarding often takes place in polluted areas, including city centers and industrial zones. Paved roads, polluted air, and toxic landfills form the environments for most skateboarders. They experience what is called polluted leisure in grey spaces, making them exceptionally aware of ecological challenges.

Perhaps due to this heightened sensibility, an increasing number of skateboarders reportedly strive to improve society by addressing other social and humanitarian issues: gender inequity, racism, mental illness, unsafe cities, and climate change. Women-led organizations are demanding equal pay among professional skateboarders.

In response to these values, design and construction companies are using more long-lasting and ethically produced materials to create skateable spaces. This ethical development in skateboarding turns the sport into a self-aware, diverse network of communities, some of which are linked with wider social movements. Therefore, some scholars use what they call rolling ethnography, in reference to skateboard wheels, to investigate the activity.

In anthropological and cultural studies, the familiar term “emic perspective” refers to understanding a culture from an insider’s viewpoint, thereby illuminating interpretations of people in that culture.

But the scholarly literature on skateboarding is not exclusively written by practitioners of the sport. Autoethnographic analyses of skate culture in Japan, China, South Korea, Indonesia, Afghanistan, and other regions reveal profound site-specific links to different aspects of human existence.

Formerly seen as a self-taught pastime, skateboarding is evolving into the academic subject of skate pedagogy, presented through youth skateboarding programs that promote play therapy, spiritual development, and educational practices of healing.

In the book's ten chapters, contributors to *Skate/worlds* observe how, as a teaching activity, skateboarding has increasingly ethical, and not merely ludic, content. They describe skateboarding as an open-source learning community, an academic subject, a form of lifelong learning and public pedagogy, public art, and a vehicle for lessons in anticolonialism.

Among these, a lucid chapter by John Dahlquist, vice principal of a Swedish high school, reports on the social and educational benefits of skateboarding, including a sense of communal belonging and acceptance. Nevertheless, just as skateboarding can add excitement to student schedules, teenagers who intermittently lose interest in the sport may also neglect their academic pursuits.

Few classroom study subjects are as dynamic as skateboarding, which may prove a relative distraction for some pupils. Meanwhile, organizing skateboarding academically may detract from the fun for those seeking respite from school-related responsibilities in their leisure hours. Dr. Dahlquist recommends structuring programs according to unique contexts, rather than trying to apply set protocols to every educational circumstance.

Equally singular, a chapter by Noah Romero and Douglas Miles explores the anti-colonial skate pedagogy of Apache Skateboards, a Native American company in Arizona that offers skating demonstrations, contests, concerts, and art shows on Indian reservations in the American Southwest. According to Miles, the company founder, skateboarding resembles the Apache warrior tradition in that both boost concentration and inner strength.

Skate/worlds presents specific recommendations on how teaching approaches to skateboarding may be applied at different international institutions. Given the range of sites described overall, the book is helpful and coherent, although some contributors employ more ponderous academic jargon than others.

In *Skateboarding and the Senses*, Dr. Hölsgens delves beyond education and explores sociology, urban geography, sensory studies, and sociocultural anthropology, among other subjects. Six short chapters discuss corporeal, ecological, and other perspectives on the sport. Perhaps because of the brevity of its format to fit a publisher's series, this book is more impressionistic than the evidence-based practical *Skate/worlds*.

Indeed, *Skateboarding and the Senses* begins with the unabashed declaration: "The text before you is built on the premise that skateboarding is something magical."² This implies that agreeing with the arguments in it may be an article of faith rather than an outcome of rational research.

Some readers may be willing to accept the abstract claim that the way skaters move is related to their ambition for social action. Others may expect a more factual, rather than merely metaphoric, celebration of the sport.

Compared to the respectful distance kept from the athletes in *Skate/worlds*, *Skateboarding and the Senses* probes their injured feet and elbows with relentless vigor. In trying to explain the activity's delights, the authors turn to bodily matters as solutions for the exuberance expressed amidst grim asphalt, granite, and steel cityscapes.

Oddly, pollution and other unhealthy conditions are necessary for skateboarding to achieve its full life-giving function; presumably, it would be less impactful in a rural venue, at least according to the authors.

Enchanted by the prospect of skateboarding as a healing, sustainable venture, *Skateboarding and the Senses* asserts that it features "grit, scuffs, stench, filth, pollution, and sweat and also cleanliness, purity, order, and health."³

Somewhat exalted, grandiose claims about mysterious, enigmatic elements of skateboarding further place this highly personalized text in the domain of speculation, rather than on any list of immediate applications. For this reason, academic readers may choose to prioritize Dr. Höllgens' other volume, *Skate/worlds*, as containing more rationally presented material of practical use.

Yet, despite its overtly impressionistic tone, *Skateboarding and the Senses* still draws attention to, without proposing solutions for, skateboarding-related issues such as the commercialization of leisure activity, capitalist definitions of success and failure, privatization of public space, urban pollution, and social inequality.

As such, both Open Access volumes are valuable additions to the burgeoning bibliography on the subject.

Notes

1. See, among others, Atencio, Matthew. Becky Beal, E. Missy Wright, and ZaNean McClain. 2018. *Moving Boarders: Skateboarding and the Changing Landscape of Urban Youth Sports*. Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press; Borden, Iain. 2019. *Skateboarding and the City: A Complete History*. 2nd ed., London: Bloomsbury Visual Arts; Butz, Konstantin. 2012. *Grinding California: Culture and Corporeality in American Skate Punk*. Bielefeld: transcript Verlag; Butz, Konstantin and Christian Peters, eds. 2018. *Skateboard Studies*. London: Koenig Books; Clark, Jonathan Russell. 2022. *Skateboard*. London: Bloomsbury Academic; Friedel, Sophie. 2015. *The Art of Living Sideways: Skateboarding, Peace, and Elicitive Conflict Transformation*. Cham: Springer; Hölsgens, Sander. 2021. *Skateboarding in Seoul: A Sensory Ethnography*. Groningen: University of Groningen Press; Kilberth, Veith and Jürgen Schwier, eds. 2019. *Skateboarding Between Subculture and the Olympics: A Youth Culture Under Pressure from Commercialization and Sportification*. Bielefeld: transcript Verlag; Lombard, Kara-Jane, ed. 2016. *Skateboarding: Subcultures, Sites and Shifts*. London: Routledge; McDuire-Ra, Duncan. 2021. *Skateboarding and Urban Landscapes in Asia: Endless Spots*. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press; McDuire-Ra, Duncan. 2021. *Skateboarding Video: Archiving the City from Below*. Singapore: Palgrave Macmillan; O'Connor, Paul. 2020. *Skateboarding and Religion*. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan; O'Malley, John. 2019. *Urethane Revolution: The Birth of Skate—San Diego 1975*. California: The History Press; Petrone, Robert. 2023. *Dropping In: What Skateboarders Can Teach Us about Learning, Schooling, and Youth Development*. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press; Snyder, Gregory. 2017. *Skateboarding LA: Inside Professional Street Skateboarding*. New York: New York University Press; Willing, Indigo and Anthony Pappalardo. 2023. *Skateboarding, Power, and Change*. Singapore: Palgrave Macmillan; and Yochim, Emily. 2010. *Skate Life: Re-Imagining White Masculinity*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.
2. Hölsgens, Sander and Brian Glenney, *Skateboarding and the Senses: Skills, Surfaces, and Spaces* (Routledge, 2024), 1.
3. Hölsgens, *Skateboarding and the Senses*, 3.

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