Skateparks: Trace and Culture
Volume I

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Cover. Frontside of Neilson Park skatepark sign, Rokeby, Tasmania, (image by author, 2016).
Figure 1. Abandoned shopping trolley, Humpty Doo, Northern Territory, (image by author, 2018).
Dedication

I would like to dedicate my thesis to the family and friends who have supported me throughout the lifecycle of this project and who have journeyed with me from pillar to post, capturing my skatepark traces along the way.

To my amazing wife Ally Drinkwater. How fortunate I am to share my life with you. Without your love and support, fierce intelligence and passion for travel, I would not have achieved half of what I have.

To my children, Zahki, Evie and Esther. You have each quite literally grown up with this project, and I am so lucky that you each enjoy skateboarding! I love you all.

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Dan Collard, for your ongoing friendship and dedication to going for a roll.

Figure 2. Graffiti traces captured at Albury skatepark, New South Wales, (image by author, 2016).
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Figure 3. Alien landscape captured at St Clair skatepark, New South Wales, (image by author, 2014).
Statement of Authentication

The work presented in this thesis is, to the best of my knowledge and belief, original except as acknowledged in the text. I hereby declare that I have not submitted this material, either in full or in part, for a degree at this or any other institution.

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Abstract

Tucked away on the fringes of playing fields and brownfield land, skateparks have a reputation for being unsavoury, and even dangerous spaces, where anti-social behaviour is to be expected. Research shows however, that much of the activity that occurs in the space is positive, both physically and socially. This study aims to explore both anti-social and pro-social aspects of skateparks, and investigate the complex relationships that occur with and within skateparks. The study questions whether current sports-focused planning models are appropriate for an activity that is so steeped in urban culture.

Utilising photography as a research tool, the study documented 136 skateparks in Australia and overseas. These photographs reveal ways to read the visual traces left behind by the users of the skateparks, and demonstrates the important role that the skatepark plays for users of the space. The documented skateparks have been re-coded as a result of their usage by individuals and groups, and the recurrence of these traces from site to site, country to country, proves that this is not an isolated phenomenon, but that skater communities on a global level speak a common visual language.

Rather than a skatepark being developed solely as a functional sporting venue, as is often the case in Australia, this research supports an alternative approach to design development—as vibrant cultural zones that contribute positively to the physical, social and cultural wellbeing of young people who use these spaces.

Figure 5. Abandoned skateboard deck, Reservoir, Victoria, (image by author, 2015).
Dropping In

In 2012 I was invited to be part of a steering committee for a new skatepark being developed in a park not far from where I lived. The committee was made up of a selection of community members: neighbours and surrounding residents, existing and potential park users, those who could offer expertise in the design, and representatives from the local council, namely a recreation development officer and a project manager. As an active skater myself, and father of three young skater children, I was keen to be involved, and to act as a representative of the skater community.

As it was, my town already had a public skatepark, built in a land depression at the end of a dead-end street, under a bridge, next to a vacant block, sandwiched between the highway and railway line (Figures 6, 7, 8). The closest occupied building was a pub about 300 metres up the road, which has a local reputation for being somewhat rowdy. Visibility into the site by the general public was extremely poor, verging on non-existent, which contributed to low levels of use from younger, less experienced skaters, female skaters, and supervisors who simply found the space to be unpleasant. My mother-in-law had long since refused to take my children there due to the unease that she felt in the space.

A nearby park was chosen as the site for the new skatepark, and local residents were invited to provide feedback on the development. In my role as a steering committee member I read and considered this feedback, and whilst none of it was particularly scathing, I was still surprised that of the 23 respondents, only 2 were in favour of the development, leaving an overwhelming 21 negative responses. People worried that the skatepark would attract teenage boys demonstrating antisocial behaviour, with the greatest fear being them congregating after dark. Some residents already recognised the park as a magnet for antisocial behaviour, and were concerned that building a skate facility would escalate this. One elderly female resident made threats to council that she would shoot contractors when they began work, which resulted in police being engaged, weapons checks being done, and work being held up for a week (Dudley-Bestow, personal communication, 2019). I knew that this wasn’t a localised issue as I had closely followed a highly criticised development in Newcastle, New South Wales, where:

...the ‘Protect Empire Park’ group was particularly vocal with its concerns about graffiti, vandalism and other antisocial behaviour the skate park might attract... At one point there was even a push to relocate the project to Broadmeadow. (McMahon, 2011)

The community distaste that surrounded both of these developments left me reflecting on where skateboarding stood in its position of a not quite here, not quite there sport/pastime/hobby/profession. As a 40-something skateboarder, I took issue with the way skateboarding and skateboarders were actively shunned and abused by some members of the broader community. When visiting regional parks, I questioned their planning and construction, and critiqued why council bureaucrats who were even further removed from the target group of users than I was, had ultimate say over the end result. Council planners were in a position of power to dramatically affect whether skateparks became hubs of youth community and places of pro-social development or dangerous, isolated blackspots that attracted and bred antisocial behaviour.

And so I embarked on a research journey to investigate the role that skateparks play in defining and establishing burgeoning youth identities, and how the cultural significance of skateboarding is expressed by users of the space. Through this process I will demonstrate that a skatepark is much more than a council-provided sporting facility but rather a rich, complex social hub of activity that can be enjoyed safely by a broad range of participants and stakeholders.

Figure 6. To access Katoomba skatepark, go past the vacant block...
Figure 7. ...under the bridge...
Figure 8. ...and you will find it sandwiched between rail line and highway, (images by author, 2013).
Scoping the Scene

Skateboarding provides practitioners with a wide variety of physical and pro-social needs within a youth-orientated age group and beyond (Bradley, 2010; Hetzler, Hunt, Stickley, & Kimura, 2011). Skateboarding is practised predominantly by young males (Johns, 2011; Németh, 2006; Thompson, 2002) between the ages of 11 and 17 years (Bradley, 2010) and is affectionately viewed as a ‘lifestyle sport’ (Corte, 2012) due to participants referring to skateboarding as more like a ‘lifestyle’ than a ‘sport’ (Wheaton, 2010).

On a physical level, skateboarding provides participant access to a physical pursuit that develops coordination, endurance and balance. Perhaps more importantly though, skateboarding (and indeed all lifestyle sports) represents an avenue ‘for sporting participation and social engagement for men and women, young and old, who have been alienated by traditional school-based and institutional sport practices’ (Tomlinson, Ravenscroft, Wheaton, & Gilchrist, 2005).

On a social level, skateboarding has been cited as harbouring great potential for developing social and entrepreneurial skills (Jenson, Swords, & Jeffries, 2012) as well as identity (Shannon-McCallum & Werner, 2008). Johns (2011) lists the reasons ‘why youth enjoy skateboarding’ as:
- Participant self-control and self-organisation;
- Cooperation valued over competition;
- Creativity and self-expression; and
- Challenge, perseverance and success.

Despite the documented benefits of skateboarding, skaters continue to suffer a bad public image and are often viewed as ‘problems’ or ‘nuisances’ (Woolley, Hazelwood, & Simkins, 2011). Firstly, the typical skateboarder does not align to mainstream society and has been historically viewed as rebellious and anti-authoritarian, belonging to an alternative subcultural group (Borden, 2019). On top of this, the act of skateboarding is globally recognised as an extreme sport (Fang & Handy, 2017) that is often practised in public spaces where the perceived risk to public safety and potential property damage are on full display (Woolley et al., 2011). The negative public attitudes that stem from this marginalise skateboarders and further cement preconceptions of skateboarders as being ‘risky’, ‘devious’ and ‘unsavoury’ (Taylor & Khan, 2011). Consequently, purpose-built skateparks are often embedded with similar institutional assumptions.

Despite the critics, skateboarding is deeply rooted in mainstream culture (Borden, 2015) and has even been incorporated into many school sporting curricula, both in Australia (Skateboard Riding, n.d.) and abroad (Borden, 2015, 2019). In support of the positive aspects of skateboarding, Jenson et al. (2012) argue that ‘rather than legislate or design out skaters, civic leaders would benefit from allowing skate scenes to colonize and re-invent parts of the city as a wholly natural part of a city’s fabric’ (387). In the Guardian article ‘The new skate city: How skateboarders are joining the urban mainstream’, Borden (2015) cites pro-skating initiatives that are opening up the urban landscape to skateboarding, with skate-friendly features designed into the civic architecture. It is heartening to see some councils slowly transforming attitudes from that of intolerance to actively welcoming skateboarding, which adds ‘artistic, cultural, educational and commercial value to our urban lives’ (Borden, 2015).
A (very) Brief History

In a guide to developing and managing skate facilities in Queensland (Brisbane City Council, 2002), it is suggested that the popularity of skateboarding moves in waves of approximately seven years. This is aligned, to a degree, with Borden’s (2001) ‘boom’ years, where a series of internal and external technological developments influenced the rise and fall (and rise and fall again) of skateboarding participation. The mid-fifties brought the first commercial skateboards (Borden, 2001) which were strongly marketed as toys. The ‘Sidewalk Surfboard’, ‘Wipeout’, ‘Super Surfer’ and ‘Pipeline’ entered the scene in the sixties and tapped heavily into the burgeoning surf culture, where manoeuvres like carving and walking the nose were directly influenced by surfing (Figures 9, 10).

The mid-sixties also saw skateboarding incorporated into mainstream media via the first issue of *The Quarterly Skateboarder* magazine (The Original SkateBoarder, 2019), as well as the Academy Award–winning film *Skater Dater* (Borden, 2001). Clay wheels replaced metal wheels in the late sixties, and this technological advance allowed skateboarding to be practised more dynamically (and safely) due to their greater tolerance for less than perfect terrain. The next technological advance occurred in the 1970s, when polyurethane wheels provided the traction and dampening for a more aggressive style of skating, and so was born the truly modern skateboard (Borden, 2001). Surf-style carves were performed ever higher up banked walls and ramps, and thanks to a prolonged drought in California, empty swimming pools provided the perfect terrain for such manoeuvres. It was at this time that skate culture started to come of age, asserting itself as a legitimate sporting and cultural pursuit. The Bahne advertisement eloquently asserted the maturing of skateboarding with its simple message: ‘It’s not a toy!’ (Figure 11).

Media coverage of this new style of skateboarding was high via the revamped *SkateBoarder* magazine, and as a result, Los Angeles became the focal point of what is now recognised as the birth of modern skateboarding and skate culture (Vivoni, 2009). It was on these perfect concrete waves (commonly referred to as transitions) that the modern aerial style of ‘transition skating’ was born, along with the invention of the ‘ollie’—the act of applying sharp downward pressure on the tail whilst simultaneously sliding the front foot forward, effectively popping the board off the ground, which has become the foundation of most modern skateboarding tricks (Borden, 2001). A downturn in the popularity of skateboarding in the mid-eighties resulted in many skateparks becoming unviable, with most eventually shut down (Borden, 2001). This resulted in more skaters...
turning to the streets, and by the late 1980s street skating was the dominant style over vert. The double kick deck was introduced to the market in the late eighties (Hill, 2007; History and Importance of the Vallely Barnyard Deck, 2015) and quickly became the dominant design, which is still the case today (Figure 12).

With the inception of the widely televised ESPN X-Games in 1995, skateboarding not only saw a 74.1 percent growth between 1998 and 2008 (Weindruch, 2017), but also saw a new breed of skateboarder, ‘rooted in individualistic hyper-consumerism’ (Lorr, 2005). Described by Lorr (2005) as a ‘4th wave skater’, young skaters were drawn by televised celebrity and hype, and grew up immersed in the commercialisation of the sport (Lorr, 2005). This 4th wave skater stands at odds with the generation before, the 3rd wave, who believed that the X-Games ‘cheapened the meaning of the sport and ruined some of the creative and communal personality of the sport’ (Lorr, 2005). Borden (2019) acknowledges this shift towards overt commercialisation by suggesting that because of this new hyper-consumer generation, professional skateboarders could suddenly make a good living being sponsored by non-skateboarding related companies.

Every peak has seen a subsequent lull in the sport, but Brisbane City Council’s Guide to Developing and Managing Skate Facilities in Queensland (2002) states that each low is higher than those that came before, meaning that the popularity of skateboarding has had a steady growth rate to where it is today. The Australian skatepark guide recognises over 1700 skateparks in Australia (Australia Skateparks, 2019), with associated price tags upwards of $1 million (King, 2014). Aaron Wallis estimates that each development carries an approximate $200,000 price tag and that, on average, 20 new skateparks are built every year (Wallis, personal communication, 2012). Kellett and Russell (2009), however, place this figure as high as a hundred or more skateparks being built every year, albeit between 2005 and 2009. Due to the longevity of such constructions (Albany skatepark, built in 1972, is thought to be Australia’s oldest, and is still actively used) and a government spend of approximately $340 million to date (using Wallis’s calculations), there is a strong argument for research that focuses on skateparks and the systems that support them.

...skateboarding has become an international phenomenon that is a virtual mainstream thread in the fabric of today’s worldwide popular culture (Petrone, 2008)
In Borden’s (2001) seminal text, Skateboarding, space and the city: Architecture and the body, skateboarding is described as being practised in both found space and constructed space. Found space relates to the pre-existing urban landscape being utilised for the purpose of skate pursuits. Street skating (as a skate discipline) is practised in found space—streets, schools, shopping plazas, drainage ditches. In found space, the skater is utilising the built environment for activities for which it was not otherwise designed (Jenson et al., 2012). Borden (2001) contextualises this with a real-world example:

In the case of the handrail, the skateboarder’s reuse of the handrail—ollieing onto the rail and, balanced perilously on the skateboard deck, sliding down the fulcrum line of the metal bar—targets something to do with safety and turns it into an object of risk. The whole logic of the handrail is turned on its head. (192)

Such use of public space, though, can cause skaters to be viewed as ‘problems’ or ‘nuisances’ (Woolley et al., 2011). Vivoni (2009) states that skateboarders are excluded from many public spaces due to public safety and property maintenance, and offences that a skateboarder can commit include ‘noise pollution, loitering, property defacement and trespassing’ (142). Woolley et al. (2011) add to this by outlining the three control methods being used to deter skateboarding in public space: social (security staff), legal (by-laws and curfews) and physical (constructing skateparks and creating unskateable features in public spaces). The problem with these various methods of control is that they further marginalise skateboarders from the broader community, cementing preconceptions of what skateboarders represent—‘risky’, ‘devious’ and ‘unsavoury deviants’ (Taylor & Khan, 2011).

**Construct space** describes sites and spaces that are developed with the sole purpose of the skater in mind, in other words, a skatepark. Here, vert skaters (as a skate discipline) skate on transitioned ramps that are not commonly encountered in found space (Figure 13). The vert skater therefore will rely on purpose-built skateparks for their preferred terrain.

Whilst I have defined skateboarders as belonging to either a street or vert identity, crossovers exist between the two groups. Within most skatepark environments, specific space would be dedicated to both street skaters and vert skaters. Therefore it is possible to be a street skater without ever skating on the street, or,
to be more precise, in found space. The street skater will skate on features within the skatepark that mimic the street (or urban) environments. These ‘contrived spaces’ (Wallis, personal communication, 2015) offer the park skater many of the features that a street skater would seek out in the natural urban environment—handrails, ledges, gaps and stairs, albeit in a safe, controlled environment.

Reservoir Skatepark in Melbourne is a wonderful example of how far a skatepark designer will go to mimic the obstacles that a street skater might seek out, with much of the park being constructed with objects either gleaned from the urban environment or appropriated to reflect desirable urban features. The US-style fire hydrant and Jersey barrier, (a widely utilised concrete road barrier), brings an exotic piece of New York style to the outer suburbs of Melbourne. In this instance, the boundaries between skate feature and civic furniture is so blurred that it is difficult for some to tell where the skatepark begins and ends. I witnessed a couple supervising their child and enjoying lunch on a skate obstacle craftily disguised as a picnic table (Figure 14). The irony isn’t lost on me: the skaters get a dedicated park with a bench obstacle, but they can’t skate the bench because the general public uses it as a seat.

Similarly, an innocuous metal pole documented in Launceston, Tasmania further blurs the boundaries around contrived street-skating features found in skateparks (Figure 15). The metal pole, bent over as though it has been run into by a car, offers the skaters a chance to ‘pole jam’, where the skater uses the pole's angle to grind and launch (Figure 16). When pole jams are skated in found space, they are created through an act of alteration to the natural environment where practitioners bend an existing pole, with the help of a car or angle grinder. The skateboarding zine Papier featured an article that demonstrated this very act (Skateboard Terrorists, 2015). The context in which the pole jam exists in a skatepark, mimicking found space vandalism, demonstrates the importance that skatepark designers place on recreating an authentic street-skating experience.

As a means of stimulating a sense of connectedness, constructed youth engagement often occurs during the design phase of a new skatepark, and Bradstreet (2009) claims that ‘public process’ is the single most important phase in developing a new site. Jenson et al. (2012) argue, however, that skaters often see this as a token gesture, and Taylor and Khan (2011) add that youth feel that their opinions are not as valued as more vocal adults who may oppose the development. Whilst adult acknowledgement of youth needs can foster a sense of community connectedness, the youth that are often in an advocatory

Figure 14. Skate obstacle or picnic table? The boundaries are blurred at Reservoir Skatepark, Melbourne, (image by author, 2015).
Position do not necessarily represent the needs of their constituents (Whitlock, 2007). Most revealing perhaps is Whitlock's (2007) findings that youth who are most in need are also the least likely to participate in community-initiated activities, such as focus groups and forums. Woolley et al. (2011) suggest that providing youth with a designated skate spot entitles the city to outlaw even greater tracts of the urban landscape to skating. Some skaters also believe that purpose-built skateparks become a way to be controlled by powers who do not understand or appreciate skate culture (Bradley, 2010; Jenson et al., 2012), effectively placing skateboarding and skateboarders ‘out of sight’ (Németh, 2006). Thompson (2002) notes, ‘They build one (skatepark) just as an excuse’ (37). A converse argument exists though, where Shannon-McCallum and Werner (2008) explain that on a municipal level, a skate facility was regarded by skaters as symbolising the amount of care that the community had for youth. Based on these demonstrated conflicts in youth engagement, further research is needed to determine the effectiveness of current planning models.

In Australia, once a skatepark has been built, local councils have the opportunity of incorporating a structured management program where the facility is staffed, supervised and managed by the YMCA (www.skatepark.ymca.org.au). At the start of this research journey, Skateboarding Australia (SBA) did also offer a development program called ‘Streetwise’, but at the time of publication, this appears to have ceased operation, and amalgamated with the YMCA. Kellett and Russell (2009) found that of the 990 skatepark facilities that existed at the time of research, only 20 actually participated in the ‘Streetwise’ program (74), and only 12 skateparks in Australia (11 in Victoria and one in Western Australia) were utilising YMCA skatepark management services, with skateparks staffed, supervised and managed by the YMCA organisation. SBA representative Samantha Armeyts (personal communication, 2012) stated that the ‘Streetwise’ participation figure was adjusted to include 110 councils across the 1400 skateparks that existed in Australia at the time. Kellett and Russell (2009) state that whilst the majority of local councils provide for the facility development, in the end, ‘skatepark users are left to their own devices to participate and use the facility’ (74). Bradley (2010) in turn acknowledges that on a youth user level, this is the preferred approach due to a youth desire to ‘not be organized or supervised by adults’ (303). From this information, it is evident that council funding does not often extend beyond providing a space for, and building a skatepark. Whilst development programs do exist, most facility providers are either not aware of or choose not to invest in such capital.
Where is the Gap?

Building on Borden’s definitions (2001) of found and constructed space, my research has established a third classification: reconstructed space. This term refers to a skatepark that has undergone a transformation at the hands of the user as a way to stamp a sense of ownership over it. Reconstructors of space embed social and cultural knowledge and meanings linked to place and history, which go on to form part of a subcultural language of place. Such narratives may not be immediately evident to a casual observer. For example, graffiti at a skatepark is often viewed on a macro level, where graffiti is either present or it isn’t, but on a micro level, when we read, analyse and understand the graffiti, we discover relationships that occur between the user and the space (Figure 17).

Visual traces that I have documented include material phenomena such as graffiti, littering, embellishments, stickers and vandalism. Indeed, as I have come to see it, any reconstruction which has altered the original skatepark, both structurally and non-structurally, can be valued for the insights it gives into the cultural and social practices of the skaters who use the space, and the broader culture to which they belong.

Figure 17. The reconstructed space reveals usage beyond skateboarding. (Image by author, 2017).
Research Methods

This body of work is multifaceted in that the exegesis provides an understanding and appreciation of the creative outcomes whilst the creative process has been a key factor in developing my exegesis. Indeed, as a graphic design lecturer and practitioner, I am adept at the cyclical nature of ideation, research, testing, feedback and reflection (Skolos, 2012). Over the course of this project, my visual approach has strayed from the aesthetic to focus largely on the visual objective. Likewise, my exegesis has evolved from being less objective, serving only to justify my creative outcomes, to being more lyrical and reflective of my creative outcomes—a body of work in itself. The exegesis now plays a crucial role in supporting the creative component thanks to the symbiotic relationship between the written and visual components, where each element affects the other. Barrett and Bolt (2010) state:

...the exegesis provides an opportunity for the creative arts researcher to elucidate why and how processes specific to the arts discipline concerned mutate to generate alternative models of understanding (62).

I have come to the realisation, therefore, that each component, written and visual, is equally important, where one is required to fully understand the other. The exegesis allows me to explain the significance of my research process and outcomes, and place these within a research context (Barrett & Bolt, 2010).

But what research context does it fit into? Creswell’s (1998) description of five different qualitative studies (biography, phenomenology, grounded theory, ethnography and case study) has allowed me to define my research process as primarily ethnographic, due to the way that my research findings present as a ‘description and interpretation of a cultural or social group or system’ (38). However my research differs in the way that it does not incorporate human subjects but, rather, focuses on the material aspect of the culture. It also differs in that I have not been challenged by ‘gatekeeper’ issues, as the lack of human subjects in this study has negated the need to liaise with key informants in order to gain access to the information.

Creswell (1998) cements my resolve further in the way he describes ethnographic study outcomes as being a detailed description, an analysis and an interpretation of the culture-sharing group, resulting in a “holistic cultural portrait of the social group that incorporates both the views of the actors in the group (emic) and the researcher’s interpretation of views about human social life” (60).

Whilst I confidently label my design research process and outcomes as ethnographic, my process of data collection, analysis, reflection, adjustment, further data collection, further analysis, further refinement, even further data collection and even further analysis would be better described by the zigzag approach of grounded theory (Creswell, 1998). This is reinforced by the grounded theory approach being heavily dependent on coding, a method I have adopted as a way to discover and explore hidden narratives within my images as well as observe and record trace frequencies, concurrences and geographic relationships (Figure 18).

Figure 18. Trace frequencies across multiple sites revealed hidden narratives, (images by author, 2014-2018)
Practice-based Research: a Chronology

My preliminary research began with fly-on-the-wall observation and photographic documentation and of over 40 skateparks in New South Wales, Queensland, South Australia and the Northern Territory. My initial analysis indicated that whilst many councils provided skateparks for their constituents, a large number of these developments showed a lack of consideration for the usability of the facility. Examples of this occurring within Australia include inappropriate use of materials and construction methods, prefabricated skateable features being used in unsuitable environments, lack of consultation with the end user, and poor choice of location.

As discussed by Wallis (personal communication, 2012), most skatepark developments in Australia are designed and managed as a sporting discipline and have a propensity to be located in existing green spaces or added to playing fields and sports precincts. Whilst this provides ample space for development, a downside is if the resulting development becomes difficult to access and isolated (in terms of low visibility and incidental supervision) from the general public and passers-by. I have visited many sites that fall into this category, most notably in coastal communities where the skatepark is far removed from the populated beaches and parks. The fact that skateboarding has such strong historical links to surfing makes these locations all the more unfortunate. The famous surf towns of Kiama (Figure 19) and Ulladulla (Figure 20) in New South Wales each have skateparks far from the more vibrant coastal zones of the community.

Other examples of problematic design include the use of prefabricated metal skate ramps in areas that experience high summer temperatures (Figure 21). Problems arise due to the fact that the hot Australian summer can create an approximate surface temperature of around 80°C—hot enough to cause significant burns to any exposed skin that comes in contact with the ramp for even brief periods of time. Online site surveys have found many references to metal skateparks that present dangers from burns. In a *Thrasher Magazine* article, Peter Ramondetta recounts his experience with a hot metal ramp:

‘I fell on my arm and face, slid down the ramp, and just laid at the bottom. The ramps were super hot. Everyone was freaked out and didn’t want to move me until the ambulance got there, but by the time they did I had third-degree burns on my arm and some on the side of my face because the ramps were so hot.’

(Broach, 2010)

Even in relatively mild English summer conditions there are reports of young children suffering third-degree burns after crawling onto a hot metal ramp (Mother’s Warning as Baby Suffers Excruciating Burns, 2016). Interestingly, when a young child in New York burnt her hands on some newly installed metal play equipment, the victim’s family was awarded a $17,500 settlement and the play equipment was quickly removed (Newman, 2012), even though the structures met national and international safety standards. This exposes a set of double standards in the United States at least, where skateboarding is listed as a ‘hazardous recreational activity’. Such legislation effectively immunises any public entity or public employee from litigation (Amell, 2003), and in the United States,
Howell (2008) proposes that liability cases are virtually unheard of:

...skateparks can be thought of as legally binding contracts: recreation space in exchange for the acceptance of personal responsibility (492).

Skateboarders are vocal in ousting substandard skateparks that are dangerous on a material level and un-rideable by design standards. Examples of this can be seen by star ratings and comments for skateparks listed in the Australian skatepark register, (Australia Skateparks, 2019), as well as articles such as Kingpin Magazine’s ‘10 worst skateparks ever built’ (2014) (Figure 22). This particular collection of skateparks are extreme examples of how wrong the process of building a skatepark can be, and one can only assume that no skater consultation took place during the development and construction of the parks. As a result, the ensuing facilities are uninspiring and best, un-useable at worst, deterring skaters from engaging with the space.

In 2012, the much-anticipated development and construction of Kincumber South skatepark in New South Wales quickly turned into a disappointment due to the low quality of the final construction. The concrete finish was rough, and the transitions were lumpy, and inconsistent (Figure 23). After a grand opening, a hasty closing followed due to community backlash. The worst parts of the park were unceremoniously bulldozed and rebuilt to a more professional standard (Figure 24). Investigations revealed that whilst the park was designed by a professional skatepark designer, the concreting was passed on to a local contractor who had no skatepark experience or expertise. Whilst this was an unusual case, it isn’t an isolated one, demonstrated by the previously mentioned Kingpin showcase and Skatepark register rankings.

Figure 22. Is this the worst skatepark in the world? Possibly! (10 Worst Skateparks Ever Built, 2014).
Figure 23. Kincumber South skatepark’s lumpy transition, (poor build quality, 2009).
Figure 24. Parts of Kincumber South skatepark are demolished and rebuilt. (minor alterations, 2009).

Photography as a Research Tool

Over the course of this project, my research approach has evolved in ways that I couldn’t have anticipated during my initial forays, a scenario I now understand to be normal and even expected when dealing with a subject matter not often studied in academia. The fact that this research also spans such a lengthy timeframe adds to the natural evolution that has occurred. When I presented my Confirmation of Candidature my research plan focused on documenting a small collection of skateparks, two to be exact, in Katoomba and Newcastle, and document the ways in which they were used. My objective was to consider the elements of skatepark culture that were evident in the spaces and to explore the environmental and social factors that affected skaters’ usage and experiences of the skateparks.

As an active photographer and skateboarder, I initially approached this project as a documenter of culture, where my research question was: ‘How is the skatepark used, and what are the social and environmental factors that affect skatepark usage?’ I had visions of embedding myself within a group of skaters, documenting their lives from the inside out. This would create a link between the oft closed and criticised skate fraternity and those who cared to consume my resulting images and writing. This is a perfectly valid approach both for fine art and research purposes, as demonstrated by Corte’s (2012) involvement in the BMX scene of ‘Pro Town’, Greenville, North Carolina, and Larry Clarke’s often life-threatening involvement in developing Tulsa. But for my project, this approach proved to be overambitious as well as somewhat romanticised, based on me wanting to make the most of my immediate skateboarding networks and lifestyle.

Early in my research journey, my initial systematic comparative study of two skateparks in New South Wales (Katoomba and Newcastle) soon evolved into a forensic-like analysis of 136 skateparks in all Australian states bar Western Australia, even including a handful of overseas sites in Europe and Asia. During this time I amassed a vast collection of images demonstrating that all skateparks were similar in their intended function, but each was vastly different in design, material construction, location, patronage and condition.

Drawing on 20 years of photographic experience plus the added visual literacy that comes with Visual Communications lecturing and working in the creative industries, I began to analyse the photographs, searching for meaning in the commonality and differences between the skateparks that I had visited. Initial observations and focuses included the geographical location of the skatepark and its propensity to be located in sporting precincts, the material construction and
design of the skatepark, the user-added features such as graffiti, and the aesthetic potential of the space in general, allowing photographic representation of the space to be presented as fine art, essentially recoding the space for a whole new audience. This practice-based and often reflective process soon became a process of discovery as I worked my way through my archived folders, starting from the top: Alice Springs, Barcelona, Batemans Bay, Bathurst, Bellingen, Blackheath… ‘Click’, open an image, ‘click’, close an image. ‘Click’, I see concrete ramp, ‘click’, I see graffiti, ‘click’, I see beer cans wedged in fence, ‘click’, I see bags strewn around step, ‘click’, Miss you bro. RIP Paul (Figure 25).

Pause… think… reflect…

The photograph from Bishan Road Skatepark in Singapore is a side view of a grey steel ramp with five small pieces of graffiti written in what appears to be white correction fluid. The most legible reads 'Miss you bro. RIP Paul', and four further pieces further refer to the same rest in peace testimonial.

These small pieces of graffiti spark a memory. I don’t close the image but click through to a new folder. Paris, The Globe. Another epitaph, ‘RIP GINA’.

And one more, this time as far from Paris as you can possibly get, Coober Pedy, South Australia: ‘The Legend’.

Here was an occurrence of a recurring trace that transcended continents but shared the same canvas, the concrete surface of the skatepark. It led me to wonder: what was this place that is so often vilified by the general public and sometimes referred to as a breeding ground for male-centric machoism and the antisocial behaviour that comes with it, yet acts as an epitaph for the fallen comrade, a place to remember a fellow skater who has died?

From my analysis of the photographs, the chance discovery of the epitaphs triggered a framework for seeking out other visible traces that illuminated the different uses of the skating space, uses that it was not designed for. With newly found purpose I began to trawl my image bank for other recurring visual traces, only to find my research travelling in an unexpected and exciting dimension of spatial knowledge based on intervention and traces of human action.

Figure 25. Epitaphs found at Bishan Road Skate Park, Singapore, (image by author, 2014).
Building Trace Typologies

At a skatepark, every visual trace, large or small, visible or invisible, intentional or otherwise, sheds light on the culture that resides in and utilises that particular space. The smallest piece of graffiti is a trace of the cultural life that exists within the context of the localised skatepark. Likewise, the skatepark itself is a trace and represents the broader skateboarding culture (Figure 26). Anderson (2015) states that:

> Traces are most commonly considered as material in nature (material traces may include ‘things’ such as buildings, signs, statues, graffiti, i.e. discernible marks on physical surroundings), but they can also be non-material (non-material traces might include, for example, activities, events, performances or emotions). (5)

The process that I work through when I document a space follows a set routine of limited intrusion observation and photographic documentation. An initial walk through the skatepark allows me to get a sense and feel for the space, and to familiarise myself with the main user groups, both skaters and observers. As a standard practice I inform the users of my intentions and material focus, and the fact that I am not photographing any human subjects.

Once I begin photographing my focus turns to instances of signs and symbols that have been repeated across two or more sites. In general terms these signs and symbols have been placed into eight main categories: antisocial, prosocial, control, found object, furniture, graffiti, alterations/additions and stickers. Each main category can be further unpacked. For example, common repeating control themes include signage, police, safety warnings, direction indicators, and physical control mechanisms.

On reflection, now that the process of recording traces is complete, I can appreciate how my research focuses entirely on the reconstructed space, revealing ways that the skatepark is used beyond its original design, effectively transcending skateboarding itself. The resulting visual typology of repeating signs, symbols, affiliations and declarations reveal a cultural vocabulary that is shared from skatepark to skatepark, state to state, country to country.

Figure 26. Traces shed light on the culture of a place, (image by author, 2015).
Photographic Approach

When asked which photographic discipline my work fits into, I align it with the new topographic style, where the photograph’s focus on the banal becomes ‘accepted as a legitimate photographic subject’ (O’Hagan, 2010). If there’s a blank response, I pull out my iPhone and show Bernd and Hilla Becher’s black and white photographic grids, or typologies, of industrial structures—monolithic water towers, coke ovens, blast furnaces, gas tanks, silos—all categorised and displayed as typologies to enhance the similarities and differences found in each (Figure 27).

My work relates to the Bechers’ on a number of levels. Firstly, the constrained focus and subsequent categorisation of industrial monoliths reflect my own capture of found traces, albeit on a micro scale. The seeming mundanity of subject matter is similar in that I am not attempting to glorify or depict the subject as a thing of beauty, but instead, through the process of classification and repetition, demonstrate the subtle and unique differences that exist between traces that share the same message.

Further, the Bechers’ typologies circumvent the pictorialist aesthetic that was dominant at the time (Lewis, 2014), and their work has been described equally as documentary photography, historical archiving, conceptual fine art (Biro, 2012) and scientific categorisation. Their work even won an award in the sculpture category at 1991’s Venice Biennale (Hamilton, 2011). Devoid of all human subjects and focusing entirely on the subject matter, the typologies celebrate the unintentional beauty and meaning that occurs within these structures. Working to a strict photographic discipline of lighting and composition, the focus of each single frame is wholeheartedly on the spectacular ordinariness of the subject matter. Hamilton (2011) states:

> They are taken under overcast skies, to avoid shadows, and from the same exact perspective. Nothing distracts from the pure form of the structures, which are elevated to the level of sculpture.

The Bechers’ commitment to their concept—so narrow in focus, so wide in scope (Hamilton, 2011)—has played a large role in developing photography as a legitimate artform, and many photographers who were mentored by the Bechers in the New Topographic style, such as Thomas Struth and Andreas Gursky, are amongst the highest earning and most influential fine art photographers of the modern era (Bodick, 2014). Likewise, my own photographic work has been...

Figure 27. Water Towers, (Becher B & H, 1972-2009).
born from a process of design research, where each image has been utilised for a number of different purposes—initially for capturing and cataloguing site survey observation data, moving on to becoming the subject matter for coding and data management, and now, at the end stage of this project, being recognised and valued for the visual and narrative qualities that exist in standalone images, typology grids, and an extensive body of work that has been exhibited as fine art photography and published as legitimate design research.

Lewis Baltz is another photographer who works within the New Topographic discipline, and like the Bechers, his commitment to documenting the mundanity of the ‘man-altered landscape’ (Crowder, 2014) has further influenced my conceptual approach. Baltz’s photographs capture the urban encroachment on the American Midwest, and the ‘violent processes of place-making’ (Stentiford, 2014) that occurs when humans reside within this hostile landscape.

Baltz’s images depict traces of human activity found in the hinterland of urban settlement and the harsh desert: a long discarded television set that has unwittingly become part of the landscape; a shattered fluorescent tube that has indiscernibly been melded into the desert ground (Figure 28); an abandoned, sun-bleached industrial estate that sits in a state of stasis. Baltz’s photographs are devoid of emotional overtones yet are rich in human narrative, and tell tales of a hard life lived at the fringes of the American urban sprawl. While Dorothea Lange’s photographs famously documented similar environments and plights, her photographs relied on the human subject to drive emotion. Baltz’s effect is akin to Lange’s, but the narrative is created entirely from inanimate objects acting as human metaphor. Like Baltz, my photographs document traces of human intervention on the equally tortured and contested landscape of the skatepark. Like Baltz, the landscape that I document exists in the broader community as a fringe-dweller environment, not quite here, not quite there amongst the more mainstream sporting establishments, children’s play areas and shared public spaces.

On a more contemporary level, skateboarding photographers Craig R. Stecyk III and Ed Templeton have influenced my appreciation for the human condition that underpins skateboarding culture, which in turn acts as a driver for capturing and deciphering the inanimate traces that I seek out. Coming from a place inside skate culture—Stecyk is a part-owner of the Zephyr Surf Shop, where the ground-breaking Zephyr skate team was born (Borden, 2019), and Templeton is a professional skateboarder and owner of Toy Machine—their photographs depict a deep understanding of and empathy with the complex skate culture within which they reside.

Figure 28. Fluorescent Tube, (Baltz, 1977).
Stecyk has been described as a prophet (Duffel, 2012) and is recognised as one of skateboarding’s first documentarians. Indeed, if you were to conjure an image of a typical skater, the sneaker-wearing, casually dressed kids that probably spring to mind are reminiscent of Stecyk’s culture-creating images from the seventies and eighties (Figure 29). Stecyk’s gritty photographs of the Californian skate scene portray a fringe, counterculture lifestyle that resemble a cultural blueprint for what skateboarding became in the years to follow. Stecyk’s gonzo style of photojournalism, which focused more on the lifestyle aspects of skateboarding, influenced not only SkateBoarder magazine’s one million readers but also subsequent skate publications that followed such as Thrasher and Big Brother (Borden, 2019) (Figure 30).

Ed Templeton’s prolific exhibitions and publications depict the non-skating aspects of a skateboarder’s life as being culturally rich, somewhat debauched, entirely compelling and, based on his gallery representations, highly artistically relevant (Figure 21). Whilst a professional skateboarder, Templeton is far from a skate photographer. In a Leica Camera Blog interview, Templeton explains:

I never shot the act of skateboarding. It began more with the lifestyle. I was interested in the sort of trappings that the lifestyle has—how these kids fell into the stereotype: young people with huge weed habits trying to pick up girls and abusing hotel rooms on tour. The stuff you hear about happening on music tours is the same kind of stuff that happens on skateboard tours. I tried to shoot that. (Ed Templeton: A Professional Skateboarder Turns Artist, 2012)

Stecyk and Templeton are both deeply entrenched within the skateboarding community, and for them documenting skate culture was, and is, as easy as photographing everyday life around them. Their raw and intensely personal images reveal not only the act of skateboarding but the sneaks of life that are intrinsically entwined within and throughout skateboarding culture. The young people depicted in Stecyk and Templeton’s photographs are skate culture personified, balancing social conformity (or the lack thereof) with the intense creative expression that skateboarding provides. Whilst skate culture on a global level is well documented by these photographers, a gap exists in linking this rich and unique culture to the skateparks where skaters congregate. Found traces of cultural activity at skateparks provide this link, and by documenting them and presenting them to a broader audience I wish to highlight the significance of the space, and the nuances of the culture that is not evident in traditional approaches.

Figure 29. Jim Muir with Don Hoffman’s Badlands licence plate, (Stecyk, n.d.).
Figure 30. Fuck Laws Kid, Portland, (Templeton, n.d.).
Creating Traces for a Non-skater Audience

In June 2017, I exhibited a photographic response to the preliminary phases of my research entitled Skateparks: Trace and culture (Johnston, 2017) (Figure 31). The exhibition was held at the Blue Mountains Cultural Centre’s Braemar Gallery in Springwood, New South Wales and was launched by the Lord Mayor of the Blue Mountains, Mark Greenhill OAM, and Professor Peter Hutchings, Dean, School of Humanities and Communication Arts, Western Sydney University. The show consisted of 20 large-format archival prints, and the work focused largely on the aesthetic potential of a skatepark. My goal was to exhibit the work to a largely uninformed audience so they could gain an appreciation for the nuanced beauty of the spaces, and leave with a changed attitude towards skateparks and skateboarding in general. The work that was exhibited has been reproduced in the accompanying photographic book, but I have selected some key pieces to present in more detail below.

Focusing on the idea of unintentional beauty within the built environment of a skatepark, I investigated ways in which this might influence a new approach to representing the skatepark. Borrowing from Anderson’s (2015) theory, which states that a trace carries the potential of thought, reflection and reminiscence, I have created my own photographic trace by capturing the landscape of the skatepark as a way to influence the thoughts and opinions of a broader, non-skateboarding literate audience (Figure 32).

The resulting images offer the viewer a chance to see the skatepark in a new light, where the formal lines, curves and shadows reflect the vision that the skaters themselves are highly tuned in to. It allows an outsider the opportunity to experience the skatepark as I and those who use it do, consuming a common language of form, composition and beauty. It is as though we are bearing witness to the efforts made, lines carved, tricks handled and not handled, knees scabbed and clothes torn. The evidence of frenzied action is etched onto the surface of the skatepark itself, not dissimilar to the lines on the face of a person who has an interesting story to tell. Some skateparks have been continuously utilised for over 40 years and have lived through the trials and tribulations of three distinct lows that saw many other parks bulldozed, including my childhood park at North Ryde, now a bus depot. The character marks on these survivors are endearing and act as a reminder as to where skateboarding has come from. These not-so-perfect parks (compared to today’s standards) offer the rider a unique set of challenges that come with kinked transitions and rough concrete landings.
**Light Trails**

Incorporating long exposures with a light source attached to the skater has made it possible for me to visually ‘map’ the way that skateboarders engage with certain parts of the skatepark terrain. It is interesting to compare and showcase one skater’s footprint against another’s, producing a light trail portrait of style and technique. For example, the street skater tracks back and forth along a particular flat land line (Figure 33), whereas the bowl skater takes an elliptical route that has them utilising the transitions as a means to maintain continuous motion (Figure 34). Each image presents an ethereal representation of style, from skater to skater, style to style.

**Audio**

Skateparks stimulate multiple senses, primarily sight, sound and touch. Whilst sight is well covered by my photographic practice, I have incorporated sound recordings into my methodology as a way to capture and analyse soundscapes that exists across multiple sites. These soundscapes offer more than just memory cues—although they are very effective at that—but the combination of both visual and audio stimuli offers a thorough representation of the space. O’Keeffe (2015) describes that a combination of field notes and audio recordings allows for an immersive experience of a space, as well as providing material to compare different spaces. It is this comparison of spaces that I find most interesting and the way that an audio profile is unique from site to site.

Audio playback reveals that the audio profile of a concrete skatepark is very different from that of a metal or wooden park. Skateboard wheels rolling across the surface reveals how smooth or rough the ground is. Polished concrete causes the skate shoe to squeak, whereas a cheaper bitumen park would sound more like a dull scrape. One can ascertain whether the skatepark is located in an urban environment or in a park by the prevalence of traffic and/or wildlife. It is even possible to ascertain the levels of support that skaters afford each other by listening out for the occasional whoop, whistle or, my personal favourite, the ‘tap tap’ of a fellow skater’s deck being hit against the ground, the international acknowledgement of ‘dude, that was awesome!’.

Whilst there are obvious material and sensorial differences between photographic and audio data gathering, perhaps the biggest difference between the two recording processes is the fact that my photographic process is selective, where I pick out the traces that I am searching for. The audio recordings, however, do not represent the same selective process and take a more blanket approach. As

![Figure 33. Light trail: Street, (image by author, 2013).](image33)
![Figure 34. Light trail: Bowl, (image by author, 2013).](image34)
a result, sound traces are revealed that I was not aware of at the time of my site visit, offering insights into the users of the space, the materiality of the space, and the surrounding landscape that borders the space. Mohr (2007) describes a similar process:

...in the context of a visual culture, our focus on listening opened space for a larger range of physical experience, process, and perception. (188)

One downside of this recording process is that unlike visible traces, which can be photographed in an instant but represent a span of time between one trace and the next, the audio recordings represent only the moment in which the record button was depressed. In order to take full advantage of this method in the future, I would conduct multiple site visits, each visit at a different time, so that the same space could be compared across multiple visits. O’Keeffe (2015) took a similar approach, where she conducted ‘soundwalks’ along a set route ‘one day a week for two hours at different times of the day to cover the 24-hour cycle’.

Finally, what I am most aware of when reviewing the audio grabs of site visits is the sheer intensity of audible activity that is occurring in the space. The clatter and crash is constant, even when my referring field notes reveal only three or four people skating.

Figure 35. This seating area in Mt Isa, Queensland is abundant with traces, (image by author, 2018).

Coding as a Research Tool

In my quest to better understand the cultural relevance of skateparks, and the ways skateboard users engage with the space beyond that which it was designed for, I have gone through the process of coding my images to reveal patterns and insights that may not have been apparent when viewing the work on an image-by-image scale. To me, an image-by-image approach places too much importance on the individual image and its contents, and doesn’t necessarily provide holistic information about the overall context. Gillian Rose’s book Visual methodologies: An introduction to researching with visual materials (2016) provided insights on how to go about this, as well as precedent examples of existing research which uses a similar ‘image coding’ approach.

As my research evolved, I came to appreciate what was most compelling about these spaces. It wasn’t necessarily the physical quality of the concrete and transitions but rather the emotional connection that the users have with the space, a connection that comes from the vast array of experiences that occur there. From my initial macro perspective I shifted my focus entirely to the often overlooked and ignored details, actively seeking marks, relics, alterations and additions that the user has left behind (Figure 35). These visible traces become the character lines of the site and reveal the personality of the place, and those who have connected with it. Gibson (1999) describes experiencing epiphanies whilst working with material gleaned from the New South Wales Justice and Police Museum photographic archives, and how visual fragments grant ‘a glimpsed vision of some larger truths underlying daily life’ (30).
Throughout the life of this project I have consistently used photography to document skateparks, but my later phase of research took a more systematic approach of documenting and analysing my work. To assist me, I used a piece of qualitative data analysis software, where I applied codes to relevant photographs. For example, if I happened upon a piece of RIP graffiti, which is one of my codes (Figure a), I highlighted that part of the photograph and applied the code (Figure b), which then categorised it along with all of the other instances of that particular visual trace that I have come across. This allowed me to not only manage a huge amount of visual information but also discover frequency patterns that would be difficult to appreciate on an image-by-image level. Over the course of this project I have completed 136 site surveys and have identified 71 unique codes contained within 1400 images (Figure c).

The most frequently applied code is the rather prosaic sign, which features 159 times, and refers to the typical signage that exists at most skateparks. These signs are often damaged or defaced, which says much about the relationship users have with authorities telling them to abide by a set of often unrealistic rules (Figure d). The rules and regulations at older skateparks can be paternalistic, with some being outright confusing (Figure e). At some newer parks, signage reflects that a degree of community consultation has probably taken place, which results in information that relates more to the skater. At Port Augusta, tips are given on how to ‘keep hassles to a minimum’ by signalling your run, not snaking, and moving with the flow of the skatepark (Figure f).

My twenty-second most applied code, direction, refers to the 35 examples of skaters using arrows to suggest the very skatepark flow suggested in the previous sign (Figure g). This is a great example of skaters self-regulating a sport that comes with no rulebooks (Figure h).

My second most applied code is sticker—other, with a count of 145. This represents the stickers that have been placed which do not relate specifically to skatepark activities (Figure i). Interestingly, stickers seem to be the most common way to deface the abovementioned signage, which relates directly to my third most coded image, the signage form Waterloo skatepark in Redfern (Figure j).

As the three simple examples above demonstrate, the process of coding the images creates linkages and narratives that would be difficult to appreciate on an image-by-image basis.

For the curious, the third most common code is the good old-fashioned declaration of love (Figure k), although a good proportion of these are linked with my eighth most frequent code, crossed out (Figure l).
The following tables demonstrate the most frequently occurring codes (Table 1.) and how the codes related to location (Table 2.). This data was invaluable as it provided the foundation for the discussion section in this exegesis, as well as a visual narrative structure for the accompanying book of photographs.

### Table 1. Code Frequency

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<tr>
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<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fuck</td>
<td>94</td>
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<td>Crossed Out</td>
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### Table 2. Location Frequency

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<td>TAS - Tarrons</td>
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<td>VIC - Fortitude</td>
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<td>TAS - Broome</td>
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<tr>
<td>VIC - Casino</td>
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</tr>
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<td>VIC - Brunswick</td>
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<td>VIC - Caring</td>
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<tr>
<td>VIC - Port Melbourne</td>
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<td>NSW - Hay</td>
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<tr>
<td>NSW - Narrabri</td>
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<td>NSW - Ulladulla</td>
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<tr>
<td>NSW - Mudgee</td>
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<td>NSW - Miling</td>
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Discussion

The process of photographing skateparks, analysing images and applying codes has provided me with a vast amount of information on a visual level. The following section represents a synthesis of this visual information by way of a written response. Here I analyse a selection of the many and varied visual traces that I have recorded and demonstrate how they inform the viewer on the many different activities that occur in the skatepark, and how this purpose-built space has many uses beyond that which it was designed for—skateboarding.

The coding process that I adopted required me to record trace types that were repeated across two or more skateparks, which resulted in a total of 71 distinct codes. Whilst each code was considered, I have not included all codes in the following synthesis due to codes being repetitive or not appearing frequently enough to warrant inclusion. In an attempt to create a sense of order and produce an enjoyable reading experience, I have grouped the codes into the themes adaptation, alteration and addition. These have been further organised into the following:

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<thead>
<tr>
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<th>Alteration</th>
<th>Addition</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Subtractive</strong></td>
<td>Territorial/Gang</td>
<td>Found Object</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Additive</strong></td>
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<td>Rubbish</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Defamatory</td>
<td>Shoes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Drug</td>
<td>Broken Skateboard</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Gay</td>
<td>Shopping Trolley</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Love</td>
<td>Personal Items</td>
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<tr>
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<td>R.I.P</td>
<td>Sign</td>
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<td>BMX</td>
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<td>Crossed Out</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>High Point</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Adaption

When a skateboarder adds or subtracts physical features to and from the skatepark, it could be said that they have adapted the environment to suit their needs as required. Whilst one could argue that all user-added features, be it graffiti, rubbish or vandalism, are adapting the original landscape, for the sake of clarity I have limited the scope to include adaptations to skateable terrain that affect the way that the terrain is utilised (Figure 37).

Subtractive adaptions describe the removal of control mechanisms that inhibit the skatepark flow—barriers, railings and skate-stoppers, all mechanisms that limit access or usage. The most prolific of these are skate-stoppers, the physical barriers that are routinely placed in public areas as a means to exclude skateboarding from occurring in a particular space (Glenney & Mull, 2018). During this study I have documented two accounts of skate-stoppers being placed (Mt Isa, Queensland and Singapore) on the verges of the skatepark, creating a demarcation zone between skatepark and non-skateable space. In both locations, the skate-stoppers have been forcibly removed, either in protest or to open up new areas to skate (Figure 38).
At Coonabarabran and Blackheath, New South Wales, safety railings have been removed to increase the skateable areas of the skatepark, effectively opening new flow lines. Evidence that backs up this theory includes documented usage at Wingham (NSW) (Figure 39) and Narrabri (NSW), where similar quarter pipes have been built without barriers and have subsequently been utilised as jump ramps. It is important to note that this activity is more likely to be practised by BMX riders, as they have the means to utilise the quarter pipe for this purpose. At Rosny skatepark in Tasmania, this practice has developed to the point where BMX riders have fashioned their own dirt jump adjacent to the concrete quarter pipe to serve their jumping needs, avoiding the permanently fixed guardrail situated to the side.

Over time such activity kills the grass and erodes the bank, outcomes that developers were undoubtedly attempting to avoid in the first place. Developers attempt to control these ad hoc extensions by making it impossible (or possible, yet highly dangerous) for the rider to utilise this protected terrain. Control measures include placing bollards, railings and boulder fields adjacent to ramps to deter the user from encroaching on the hinterland between skatepark and the shared civic landscape (Figure 40).

At some skateparks, an angle grinder is used to cut notches into the steel coping so that when the skater grinds, the sound reflects that of pool coping (Brunswick, Victoria; Thebarton, SA). Similarly, in Molong, New South Wales an additive approach has been adopted in the bowl, where a spray-painted design on the underside of the steel coping reflects the pool tiles that are commonly found around the water line in swimming pools. This tile stencil is a direct reference to the origins of bowl riding, where Californian skaters sought out abandoned pools for the purpose of skating (Borden, 2019).

Figure 38. Skate-stoppers at Singapore’s East Coast Park have been forcibly removed, resulting in an unskateable ledge, (image by author, 2014).

Figure 39. Park users have added carpet to reduce erosion in an ad hoc park extension, (image by author, 2017).

Figure 40. Formal approaches towards stopping users from utilising the fringes of the park sometimes create dangerous zones, (image by author, 2016, image by author, 2013).
**Additive adaptations** tend to be less destructive and take on a more ad hoc approach. These features include objects that are placed in the park to either jump, grind or slide onto, or jump over—a piece of plywood, a shopping trolley, a witch’s hat (plastic traffic cone), a concrete block, a plastic crate... One might assume that skaters adding such objects are attempting to make the park more challenging, and this might be the case, but it also demonstrates the way that skateboarding satisfaction can be achieved with minimal props.

Whilst such detritus can make the skatepark look like an illegal dumping ground, these items more often than not have been added to the environment as a way to improve the park. Such additions might be as substantial and permanent as an added concrete ramp where the original developers did not consider placing one during the original construction, as is the case at Newcastle Beach skatepark in New South Wales (Figure 41). More frequently these additive adaptations are as insubstantial as a witch’s hat (Figure 42) or cement block, creating an obstacle to ollie over. In Newport, Victoria, a brick was been used to prop up a concrete seesaw, which shows that in its natural state the feature is less appealing than after being decommissioned with a brick (Figure 43).

Singapore developers have taken a more substantial approach to the embellished landscape by providing the skater with modular, hard plastic boxes, which can be pushed together to form long ledges or pulled apart to create gap obstacles. Of the three skateparks I visited in Singapore, two had these features, which were actively being moved and skated on by the skateboarders at the time of my visit (Figure 44). One may deduce that by providing moveable features the developers have acknowledged the skaters’ desire to control the landscape, but due to Singapore’s focus on clean urban environments (Chang, 2005), developers have been strategic about how to best offer the skaters the opportunity to manipulate the environment whilst minimising visual clutter and ensuring that the props used to extend the skateboarding experience are as safe and secure as possible.

Whilst not an adaptation as such, it is worth mentioning the (sometimes) extreme practice of skaters utilising parts of the skatepark that were not designed to be skateable terrain. This is demonstrated in the video *Mike V’s greatest hits*, where professional skater Mike Vallely acid drops from an electrical power box onto a ramp, to the thrill of the riotous crowd (Vallely, 2003). These documented embellishments indicate a skater’s desire to control and reinvent the ways the skatepark environment is utilised. Due to the unmovable nature of most skatepark builds, however, such embellishments and unauthorised modifications can have an adverse effect, be it on an aesthetic or more structural level. Making allowances for a spatial reinvention that doesn’t cause lasting damage to the facility might be beneficial for future developments.
Alteration

Graffiti ‘reshapes and transforms place’ (Edwards-Vandenhoek, 2012) and is used extensively at skateparks, where vast expanses of smooth concrete offer artists of all abilities a canvas. Ong (2016) states that “graffiti turns a site into place for the writer” (230).

The breadth of graffiti styles and subject matter that occur at skateparks cover a broad spectrum, from council-endorsed, commissioned ‘masterpieces’ to scrawled personal attacks. For the uninitiated, the presence of graffiti is an oft-cited negative attribute of skatepark environments. The ‘2008 Skate Park Report’ claims that non-users of skateparks find graffiti to be one of their most unattractive aspects (cited in Bradley, 2010). Paradoxically, the same report cites graffiti as being one of the most attractive aspects of skateparks amongst both non-users and users (Bradley, 2010). Loved or loathed, it is unusual to find a skatepark that does not have any evidence of graffiti, and in my field visits I am yet to find even one without graffiti. In Singapore graffiti is a criminal offence and can result in caning and a jail term if convicted (Chong, 2015). Still, the skateparks I have visited in Singapore all display signs of graffiti activity, which demonstrates an affiliation to a broader, global skateboarding culture, despite the risks involved.

Territorial/Gang

Territorial and gang traces are common and represents the seventh most prolific code in the study. Examples of these traces include tagging the postcode of either the site itself or the postcode of a neighbouring (or sometimes not so neighbouring) skatepark. Other examples include gang symbols and emblems, as well as names and acronyms for known gangs in specific areas. Interestingly, the prevalence of gang/territorial traces is much higher in regional areas, particularly those with high Indigenous populations, for example in Mt Isa (MVB—Makaveli Boys) (Figure 45), Tennant Creek, Katherine and Alice Springs (South Side Crips, West Side Soldiers). To me, this demonstrates two things: 1. There is a prevalence of gang membership in areas with greater Indigenous populations, and it is possible to cross-reference the gang names found as traces with media reports of gang violence (Mt Isa). 2. The skatepark is utilised as a gang ‘hang out’, where the gang may or may not be interested or engaged in the skating but uses the space to congregate and leave its mark (Tennant Creek).

A particular repeating trace that is of interest to me is the symbolic representation of a king’s crown. Again, this was commonly found at skateparks where there was a high local Indigenous population and it seemed to reflect American gang symbols, so a degree of appropriation may be occurring. Interestingly, the common style is of a three-point crown, which can be directly linked to specific American gangs, but I think it is more likely that this is being used entirely symbolically and has its own local meaning.

It is also interesting to note the similarity that this trace type has to surfing culture, where the ‘locals only’ law around many surf breaks is legendary and sometimes fearsome. In the film Dogtown, which chronicles the birth of modern skateboarding and skate culture, territorialism around the LA surf breaks, Santa Monica pier in particular, is well covered. This is another indication of the crossover between surfing and skateboarding.

Whilst territorial traces have been recorded, and Borden (2019) acknowledges that territorial ‘vibing’ was quite intense in earlier years, he also states that today, thanks to the globalisation of skateboarding and greater access to travel, ‘such spoiling tactics are rare, and instead, one normally finds easy allegiances between skaters’ (30).

Figure 45. Makaveli Boys 4 Life, (image by author, 2018).
Obscene traces are those that demonstrate offensive language and/or graphics, most often sexual in nature, where genitalia and sex acts are represented in crude, graphic and often exaggerated styles. Whilst sex between consenting adults isn’t obscene as a concept, representations of sex within a public space frequented by minors, often with their parents or grandparents, is somewhat challenging. In the extreme, such traces are a form of sexual harassment and violence, perpetuating a narrative of male entitlement and exhibitionism (Hayes & Dragiewicz, 2018).

The high frequency of obscene traces demonstrates an immature attitude towards sex and sexuality, where the creator of the trace is revelling in an almost otherworldly exercise, most likely driven by fantasy rather than experience. The images and scenarios are sometimes pornographic in nature (Figure 46) and reflect a sex education gleaned from the consumption of sexually explicit imagery, fed by the internet (Albury, 2014). It is also argued that pornography eroticises gender inequality, which is further exacerbated by gender representations in mainstream media (Albury, 2014).

What is interesting is how this trace type exists in this space in particular, the skatepark. In some ways, such sexualised traces reflect skate culture in general, where an overt masculinity is the ‘predominant identity within skateboarding’ (Borden, 2019) and historical objectification of women was, and still is, rife: Hubba wheels, World Industries Shorty’s and Supreme all feature sexualised imagery and objectify women (Figure 47). Many skateboarding contests use podium girls as part of the award ceremony (Figure 48). Add to this the fact that skateboarding and skateparks are self-managed, unregulated activities and spaces, where young boys, for the most part, are left to their own devices to negotiate their social, cultural and sexual development. I doubt the same overtly sexualised traces exist around other sporting arenas, as they do at skateparks, although it could be argued that mainstream sports such as Australia’s National Rugby League cheer girls, and Grand Prix grid girls represent a less overt but equally destructive objectification of women, due to the greater exposure.

**Figure 46.** Obscene traces constitute sexual harassment and perpetuate toxic masculine ideologies. (image by author, 2018).

**Figure 47.** Sexualised imagery in skateboarding advertising, (Fred Gall, Hubba wheels, n.d.).

**Figure 48.** Objectification of women on the Street League World Tour, (Nyjah Huston, Street League, 2017).
Of the 70 codes recorded, the ubiquitous *dick pic* is the fourth most noted, having been recorded 127 times, and since the release of US teen film *Superbad* (Mottola, 2007), with its monologue on dick pics and, more locally, *Summer Heights High’s* (Lilley & McDonald, 2007) texta-wielding Jonah’s dick-tation, the dick pic has become an icon amongst young males. This outlandish depiction of the male genitalia ranges from a simple cartoonish approach to something quite lifelike or altogether superhuman, with or without emanating bodily fluids. The majority of phalluses depicted are circumcised, which flies in the face of statistics that in 2018 only 4 percent of babies were circumcised in Australia (Yosufzai, 2018). The significance of this is that the dick pic isn’t a factual representation of their personal male genitalia, as the majority of the penises drawn do not represent the norm, nor is it a representation of homosexual desire. Rather, it is a visual representation of male dominance and power symbol common in skateboarding cultures (Atencio, Beal, & Wilson, 2009), as well as the risk-taking behaviour that is common for adolescents to engage in during the transition from childhood to adulthood. Olivera (2015) explains that:

Identifying with idols is common in this process, sometimes standing in the way of development of a personal identity. In the spirit of recalling the metaphor of ‘storm and stress’, the cultural and gender context become spaces in which negative identifications take place, and the causes of sexism, violence, and risk behaviour are found (82).

Benches and seats are fairly unremarkable additions at skateparks but prove to be a treasure-trove for all manner of obscene traces. The seating acts as a focal point for skatepark users to relax and hang out, and this downtime seems to coincide with graffitiing, but in a style more aligned to banter, narratives, doodles and general mark-making as opposed to stylistic pieces of considered artwork. In Nerang, Queensland, the traces are elaborate in their writing style and illustration, and equally disturbing in subject matter. One is reminded of a naughty child’s school folder, locker or even toilet cubicle and gains a sense of the unsettling banter that sometimes occurs in this space (Figure 49).

**Defamatory**

Defamatory traces are similar to the obscene in their display of dominance and power, but they differ in the way that they relate directly to someone, something or a place. Carrera-Fernández, Lameiras-Fernández and Rodríguez-Castro (2018) assert that this form of bullying and abuse allows the protagonist to reinforce their own identity through the punishment of others. Such traces comment on or question someone’s integrity (backstabbing), sexuality (*insert name* is gay), promiscuity (*insert name* is a slut) and general quality (*insert name* is shit) (Figure 50). The typical style that these defamatory traces adopt is an unaesthetic scrawl, as though the creator is writing their mind, a flippant thought perhaps. Permanent marker is the most common material used, and it is not unusual for these traces to coincide with the ‘crossed out’ trace, where the person being slagged has erased themselves from the message.

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Figure 49. Seating areas provide time and place for disturbing traces, (image by author, 2015).

Figure 50. Defamatory traces aim to bully and abuse, (image by author, 2015).
Drug

Unsurprisingly, drug references rank highly in the coding table, with most attention given to cannabis (the written word ‘weed’ and symbolic representations), cannabis smoking implements (the written word ‘bong’ and symbolic representations), LSD, acid, ice, magic mushrooms and heroin (Figure 51). Interestingly, no written (or symbolic) reference to alcohol was recorded, even though there was a high prevalence of discarded alcohol containers found at the skateparks. Other evidence of actual drug use occurring at the skateparks includes cigarette butts and packaging, bongs, used nitrous oxide bulbs (nangs) and small zip lock bags that were possibly used for carrying drugs.

On a side note, when researching the prevalence of nitrous oxide abuse, I stumbled upon a report made by Australian news media program The 7.30 Report. In it, a young female adult is discussing her use of nitrous oxide as a party drug, and the interview occurs in a skatepark, even though the young woman is not a skateboarder, nor is skateboarding mentioned at any point during the interview. It is representations such as these that manipulate public perception that skateparks are hotspots for illicit drug use (Figure 52).

It is worth mentioning here that there is a significant connection between skateboarding and drug use that has been documented in the mainstream media. Notably, many professional skateboarders from the 1980s have been affected by drug addiction and convicted of drug offences: Christian Hosoi, jailed for attempting to import crystal meth; Tas Pappas, jailed for attempting to smuggle cocaine into Australia in his skateboard decks; Jay Adams, jailed for his involvement in dealing crystal meth (Borden, 2019). Whilst these examples are extreme, they demonstrate that drug exists amongst professional skateboarders who act as role models for impressionable youth.

Oliver Pelling (2017) reflects on this in his Huck magazine article ‘Piss Druux: The legendary skate crew lucky to be alive’. In it he chronicles events surrounding the Piss Druux crew, one of the most influential groups in modern skateboarding. Rolling Stone magazine referred to them as ‘skateboarding’s newest stars’ Wright (2001), and Pelling further describes an intensity of partying unlike anything that had been seen before in skateboarding. Their influence on young skaters came not only from their huge amounts of talent but their ‘I’m going to do whatever the f**k I want’ attitude (2017). When the group started their own skateboard company they named it Baker, in reference to the propensity of Ali Boulala (one of the original Piss Druux members) to smoke copious amounts of marijuana (Pelling, 2017).

Over the last 15 years, all but one member of the group has become sober, and they reflect on the Piss Druux days as an experimental time of life (Michna, 2014). Original member Andrew Reynolds is reflective on the damage that Piss Druux and Baker members may have caused by influencing others into similar behaviours, and as a result now tries to steer kids ‘away from drinking and drugs and that whole lifestyle’ (Michna, 2014). Jim Greco, an original Piss Druux member who was the focus of the Rolling Stone article ‘The gang that couldn’t skate straight’ (Wright, 2001), has released a series of hauntingly beautifully films that mark his eleventh and twelfth years of sobriety, as well as a signature deck presumably celebrating his thirteenth year entitled ‘Year 13’ (Hammers...
USA, n.d.). Such overt dedication to his own sobriety has resulted in *Thrasher Magazine* referring to Greco as 'one of skateboarding's greatest ambassadors' (Jim Greco’s ‘Jobs? Never!!’ film, 2018).

Whilst the Piss Drunx crew represented extreme risk-taking behaviour, the problem was the large amount of exposure they were given during such a transformative time. It’s heartening to see many of these influential skateboarding figures mature and actively atone for their past actions. The found traces that I have documented demonstrate that narratives similar to those played out by Piss Drunx are being repeated in and around suburban skateparks across Australia, so one must accept that such activities still run strong in a proportion of skateboarding participants. One can only hope that these participants make it through to the other side (Pelling, 2017) and become positive ambassadors themselves.

**Gay**

References to homosexuality are either defamatory, where a person is singled out as being 'gay', or the word 'gay' is simply pasted haphazardly throughout the skatepark in a way that doesn’t directly refer to homosexuality but rather the common use of the word as an offhand insult or statement. For whatever reason, ‘gay’ or references to homosexuality are a commonly occurring trace type, having been recorded 50 times throughout the study (Figure 53).

There is not a lot of evidence of openly gay male skaters; in fact, references mostly pointed towards supposed knowledge of gay skaters who were actively concealing their sexual identity so as to not threaten their position in the heterosexual dominated skate scene (Dubler, 2016; Portwood, 2016; Welch, 2016).

In this age of relative acceptance of homosexuality it is unfortunate when ‘hiding’ is a preferred choice, but it is not difficult to find examples of discrimination occurring amongst those who do come out, as well as extreme examples of crimes committed by skateboarders against members of the gay community such as the following:

**Tim Von Werne** is an openly gay skater who rode as an amateur for Tony Hawk’s Birdhouse in the late 1990s. He effectively stepped away from the industry after an article for *Skateboarding* magazine was rejected by his sponsors because in it he ‘talked about his sexuality’ (Welsh, 2016). An article in *Huck* describes Tim’s difficult choice of either continuing his career in skateboarding in the closet or coming out.

> ‘It became pretty clear straight away that, if they weren’t willing to print the article, that if I wanted to be a professional skateboarder, I may have to think about going into the closet, which I wouldn’t feel comfortable doing. I’ve never been ashamed of being gay and I wouldn’t want to have to start feeling that I needed to be.’ (Welsh, 2016)

**Jay Adams**, legendary 1970s skater, was jailed for six months after inciting a fight with two gay men, resulting in the death of one of them. Even though Adams denied any link between the fight and sexual orientation, Adams in recent years was vocally against gay marriage:

> ‘We weren’t bashing gays, we were just out to bash anyone who we came in contact with. I’m not proud of that, but that’s just how it was for us then. As far as how I view gay relationships and gay marriage, I am 100% against them however I do respect gay people, I just tell them what the bible says.’ (Hoogstraate, 2014)
Danny Way and Josh Swindell, both professional skateboarders at the time, were involved in the bashing to death of a gay man after he attempted to purchase ‘sexual favours’ from Way (Ferrell, 1994). Even though Way was later cleared of any wrongdoing, Swindell ended up spending close to 20 years in jail for second-degree murder.

As a sign of things changing for the better, in 2016, professional skateboarder, world champion and Thrasher Magazine’s ‘Skateboarder of the Year’ Brian Anderson released a coming-out video and was described as the ‘most prominent professional skateboarder to have ever come out as gay’ (Portwood, 2016). Whilst Reynolds has been widely celebrated for his decision, the truth remains that he held onto this deep secret for his entire life for fear of the negative impact it would have on his career. Fortunately, Reynolds was able to disclose his sexuality to his immediate skateboarding community 15 years prior, who vowed to keep his sexual identity a secret until he was ready:

‘...when I did eventually come out to my friends at Thrasher and Transworld—because I knew everybody on the inside very well—they promised me they would never break my story before I was ready. And why would they? But that was a massive relief and also one rad thing about skateboarding. We have this little bubble we live in and I’m so fortunate to have done all these things that they loved me for, so they totally protected me. It was scary because I didn’t want to be out.’ (Portwood, 2016)

Love

love, and declarations of it, is the most frequently applied trace in this study, winning over dick pics, slurs and other obscenities. But it must be said that the majority of these traces were recorded at the same skatepark in France, so perhaps these outcomes are more reflective of France’s passion as opposed to a broader picture. What is interesting in Australia, though, is that the greatest prevalence of love traces are located in small country towns, especially those with high Indigenous populations. Tennant Creek in the Northern Territory and Charleville, Queensland have the highest instances of love declarations in Australia, which demonstrates that these spaces are used as much as a place for congregating and hanging out as for skating (Figure 54).

RIP

The Oxford English dictionary defines an epitaph as ‘A phrase or form of words written in memory of a person who has died, especially as an inscription on a tombstone’ (Oxford Online Dictionary, 2019), and it was the discovery of these recurring memorials across a number of skateparks both in Australia and abroad that was the turning point in my field research. It marked the point where I diverged from analysing the physical features and locations of individual skateparks to actively seeking out recurring traces and cataloguing them. I had seen an RIP dedication in the past; in fact, there is a dedication to someone who has passed away at my local skatepark. But what I was not aware of was the

![Image](image.png)

Figure 54. Love traces are more prevalent in country towns than cities, (image by author, 2018).

![Image](image.png)

Figure 55. A mosaic tile RIP memorial at Katoomba skatepark, (image by author, 2015).
Figure 56. The many R.I.P messages demonstrate a deep connection to place. (Images by author, 2014-2017)
broader global practice and the variety of ways in which these epitaphs have been marked into the landscape. Some are as insubstantial as a marker scrawl on the back of a ramp while others consist of elaborate graffiti that covers a substantial area of the skatepark. At my local skatepark, one of the bowls features an extension section that represents a tombstone, complete with ‘RIP’ in mosaic tile across the top edge (Figure 55).

More noticeable in the epitaphs than in any of the other recurring traces recorded are the nuances that have been applied to the styling, which shed light on cultural differences from site to site. For example, the epitaph trace documented in Coober Pedy (Figure 57) in the South Australian desert indicate Indigenous connections in the colour of the paint used as well as the incorporation of hand stencils, which reflect Australian Indigenous rock paintings. In Singapore an epitaph is handwritten and includes motifs that reflect SMS icons (Figure 58) with a heart on its side using the characters <3. In another, a colon and open bracket character are combined to make a sad face. On a cultural level Coober Pedy is as far removed from Singapore as it is by miles, illustrated clearly by the visual style that has been applied to what is essentially the same message. Each place shares the same intent, though, which is to honour the memory of a friend who had a deep connection with the skatepark.

Due to the perceived physical risks that revolve around skateboarding, the casual observer might wonder whether a skatepark epitaph marks the spot where a skater has suffered a fatal injury, similar to the way a roadside memorial marks the site where a fatal vehicle accident has occurred. Due to the public nature of information it has been possible to trace some epitaphs back to the event that caused the untimely death, and these rarely (if ever) relate to skateboarding or the site where the epitaph is placed. The skatepark epitaph therefore should be compared to a plaque at a beautiful lookout or a bench seat in a park that has been marked as a special place for the deceased. The graffiti is not a piece of vandalism but a heartfelt dedication to a lost friend, spoken with appropriate cultural voice. As Anderson writes, ‘Youth cultures do not necessarily care about how their traces are seen by the mainstream. They are more concerned about how they are seen and read by their own culture’ (Anderson, 2015).

What I find most heartbreaking about these traces is that they refer to real people, most of whom have probably passed away at a young age, who were active in the local skateboarding community. The fact that the skatepark has been chosen as the location for the epitaph demonstrates the importance of this place within the immediate community.

Oscar Valentin was 18 when he died in a vehicle accident on April 7, 2018. Only four months later on August 11, 2018, Oscar's best friend, Angus Prior, tragically took his own life in a ‘moment of madness’ (Cross, 2018) at the age of 18. Oscar’s passing was simply too painful for Angus to bear. Both boys lived on Sydney's northern beaches and were committed skateboarders, and Mona Vale skatepark was ‘a second home’ (Cross, 2018) to them. I first became aware of Oscar's and Angus's passing when I read about them in a news article, and what struck me in this and subsequent articles was the way that skateboarding was represented in an almost holy manner. At Angus's funeral, a guard of honour was made from skaters holding their skateboards aloft whilst the funeral procession left the church (Figure 59).
After Oscar’s funeral service, family and friends walked to Mona Vale skatepark to lay wreaths (Figure 61). A shrine of photographs and other memorabilia had been prepared on the guardrail behind the main quarter pipe. Oscar’s skateboard sat front and centre. The quarter pipe and safety rail behind had become a headstone, the skatepark a cemetery (Figure 62).

The story of Oscar and Angus is certainly a tragedy, and I highlight it because of the way in which skateboarding became an important part of the funeral proceedings; in Oscar’s case, where a traditional funeral might progress to a cemetery, the skatepark was a more fitting destination. This process reminds me of similar ceremonies that exist around surfing culture, where the community engage in a ‘paddle out’ and, for that moment, regard the ocean as altar and shrine (Luttrell, 2017) (Figure 63).

Direction

Traces that relate to skater traffic flow and organisation at the skatepark manifest as arrows that point either up or down ramps (Figure 64). At a glance one may assume that these arrows control traffic in a way not dissimilar to arrows painted on a busy road or intersection. This is undoubtedly a user-added modification and would not be enforced in any way, but it does point towards a consideration being made towards order and traffic flow. Other times arrows have been used to indicate a prime line, or spot to aim for when attempting a particular manoeuvre (Figure 65).

On a formal level, I have observed instances where traffic controls have been incorporated into the broader skatepark design as a means of teaching children the rules of the road and pedestrian safety. In Geeveston, Tasmania an Educational Bicycle Track circuits the perimeter of the skatepark. This is strictly removed from the skatepark and provides a conscious separation between youngsters learning how to ride their bikes at the sometimes unsuitable skatepark location, thus leaving the skatepark free of such approaches (Figure 66).

Figure 61. Wreaths are laid at Oscar Valentin’s memorial, (family and friends place wreaths, 2018).
Figure 62. Ramp becomes alter at Oscar Valentin’s memorial, (mourners at Mona Vale skatepark, 2018).
Figure 63. Tim Lawrence’s ashes are scattered during a paddle out ceremony, (paddle out at Clifton Beach, 2017).

Figure 64. Arrows pointing up and down the ramp indicate attempts to control traffic flow, (image by author, 2015).
Figure 65. This ‘are here’ arrow points towards a specific launch spot for a manoeuvre or line, (image by author, 2015).
Figure 66. Children learn the laws of the road at this purpose-built bicycle track, (image by author, 2016).
Figure 67. Tolosa skatepark, Hobart, Tasmania, (image by author, 2016).
Tolosa Street Park in the western suburbs of Hobart, Tasmania has been built as a park inclusive of all wheeled devices, where the layout and signage encourage young skatepark users to observe a certain order and flow, and the skatepark information sign requests that older riders give way to younger users (Figure 67).

Other less overt approaches that separate novice park users from those more experienced include separating moderate features from more advanced ones, as well as building completely new skateparks that are overall more moderate and less intimidating, as is the case at Katoomba’s Melrose Park, designed and built as a junior skate facility.

**Commission**

Commissioned artworks in skateparks are used as a way to add vibrancy and personality to the space. My local park is affectionately referred to as Katoomba Surf Club due to the large commissioned artwork adorning the back of the main ramp; Katoomba is a long way from the coast, so I guess it is fitting that this is the closest we get to surfing. Irony aside, the work has managed to last the test of time, having avoided encroaching graffiti for the last couple of years.

Edwards-Vandenhoek (2012) explains that local councils commission graffiti as a way to deter illicit graffiti from occurring in the space. She is somewhat critical of this approach as commissioned pieces tend to be a sanitised version of the ‘free, spontaneous and illicit’ graffiti that might naturally appear otherwise (2012).

I tend to agree that much of the commissioned graffiti that I have recorded displays an unauthentic appeal, and does not align stylistically or attitudinally to the visual culture that skateboarders are accustomed to. Outlandish caricatures posing on and off skateboards, declaring metaphorically and literally that ‘this is a skatepark’, or, rather, a ‘sk8 park’, seems to be somewhat off point and almost patronising. The rationale is sound but the finished product can be somewhat dull (Figure 68).

Educational campaigns are sometimes threaded into commissioned graffiti pieces, where kids are encouraged to wear helmets in Sheffield, Tasmania and practice safe sex in Katoomba, New South Wales. At Collarenebri and Coonabarabran in New South Wales, Hobart in Tasmania and Batchelor in Northern Territory local fauna are on display in commissions, while the shifting plane perspectives of the large-format graffiti at Nerang, Queensland displays a sophisticated spatial design aesthetic. Blackall, Queensland offers us a throwback to skateboard magazines prior to YouTube, where multiple exposure sequences were a popular way to demonstrate the intricacies of tricks. Here the sequence of dropping in is captured across a sequence of five illustrations, all painted on the side of a hot corrugated iron shed (Figure 69).

![Figure 68. Commissioned artwork suffers a working over, (image by author, 2016).](image)

![Figure 69. Blackall, Queensland mural reflects multiple frame sequences that were popular in magazines before YouTube, (image by author, 2018).](image)
Police themes are common as trace types, and generally the police are represented in a negative light. ‘Fuck da police’ is a common and defiantly anti-authoritative trace that originates from the protest song ‘Fuck tha Police’ by US rap band N.W.A. (Niggaz Wit Attitudes) (Figure 70). A reading of the lyrics, where the black rappers are victimised by the controlling ‘redneck, white bread, chickenshit motherfuckers’, points to an affinity with not only this particular musical style but also the feeling of victimisation that skaters might have towards law enforcement. ‘Skateboarding is not a crime’ is one of the most common skateboarding phrases (Flusty, 2000; Frye, 2016), and again reflects a dissatisfaction with the persecution that skaters often experience when skating in non-designated areas.

Indigenous

Visual traces specific to Indigenous Australians are frequently found at skateparks and consist mainly of representations of the Indigenous flag, hand stencils, representations of Australian fauna, and the text-based call to action ‘RESPECT’. The traces consist of graffiti created using paint, spray paint or marker pans, and appear to be a mix of both commissioned and uncommissioned work.

The most salient aspect of the Indigenous traces are location, the majority of them in skateparks situated in areas with high Indigenous populations. For example, the highest frequency exists in Grafton, where seven traces were recorded. This is followed by Tennant Creek (NT) and Camoweal (Qld), where four traces were recorded in each location. There are other locations with high Indigenous population where no Indigenous traces exist, for example, Jabiru (NT), Humpty Doo (NT) and Charleville (Qld).

Santa Teresa is an Indigenous community in the Northern Territory located one hour’s drive from Alice Springs. The population is almost entirely Indigenous, save a small number of healthcare professionals and national parks employees. In 2015 Santa Teresa was put on the map as the first Indigenous community to have a skatepark built within it, initiated by traditional owner and professional skateboarder Nick Hayes. The skatepark is a simple affair—two mini ramps and a small quarter pipe—and is located within the community recreation hall, the focal point for youth-based activities within the town.

While in the Northern Territory I was keen to visit Santa Teresa skatepark as I was aware of the importance of this facility both for the local community and for the future development of similar parks in other similar communities. I was also curious to see its visual traces, considering this is perhaps the most geographically and socially isolated skatepark in Australia.

Unfortunately my trip coincided with Territory Day, which meant the bulk of the population had travelled to Alice Springs and it was impossible to find someone to allow me access to the venue. Despite my best efforts after a long drive and hours trying to find someone with a key, all I could do was peer through a hole in the wall at the treasure inside.

Through that hole I was able to see a skatepark situated on a mezzanine level of the recreation hall, above the main hall area containing gymnastic mats, a basketball court and a punching bag. Around the small space that the skate area occupies there are multiple traces specific to skate culture that don’t exist in other areas in the hall. These appear to be the names of local children, written

Figure 70. An eloquent protest in Mt Isa, (image by author, 2018).
in graffiti style on boards, presumably as part of a graffiti workshop. One of the pieces includes the crown icon that is frequently found in skateparks with high Indigenous populations. The inclusion of this symbol demonstrates a cross-pollination of ideas, groups and cultural affiliations, despite the relative isolation of this community.

It is worth mentioning that the focal point of the found traces was around a public telephone attached to the outside of the recreation hall building. Here the trace types consisted of a mixture of defamatory and derogatory remarks, expressions of love, items crossed out and a variety of found objects, all reflective of traces found in less remote skateparks (Figures 71, 72).

Figure 71. The door of the recreation centre in Santa Teresa is rich with traces, (image by author, 2018).
Figure 72. Close-up of Santa Teresa’s recreation centre door, (image by author, 2018).
Skateboarding Brand

Stickers of skateboarding brands are the sixth most prevalent trace, having been recorded 111 times and found at the majority of skateparks during my study. The stickers consist of a variety of skateboarding-related brands, primarily retail outlets selling skateboarding hardware and clothing. Graffiti based on skateboarding brands is also a prominent trace but on a lesser level, recorded 30 times and sitting in twenty-fifth position. Des Forges (2011) suggests that stickers may have ‘possibly increased’ since spray paint became difficult to access for people under 18 years of age, and that an increase in anti-graffiti laws may cause people to initiate new ways to counter them. Whilst it’s beyond the scope of this study to confirm this hypothesis, it adds an interesting dimension to the sticker traces that I have recorded.

Although skateboarders have historically resisted mainstream commercialisation (Borden, 2001), stickers and graffiti traces demonstrate allegiances to a selection of core brands. Whilst reference to the term ‘core skateboarders’ is not original (Borden, 2019; Donnelly, 2006; Thorpe, 2014), in this instance I borrow the term ‘core’ from Dupont (2014), who uses it to describe the ‘informal social hierarchy within the skateboard subculture as well as how the elite members maintain their power and status within the subculture’ (556). Dupont describes how a person could be stigmatised by purchasing the wrong product, and that skateboard shops were consequently mindful of the taste preferences of influential core skaters: ‘you can tell how good a shop is by the companies it doesn’t carry’ (572).

These statements give us clues as to the importance that the right brand plays in forming a skater’s identity (Figure 73). It may be possible then to consider the brand traces that are evident at a skatepark as representing core brands within the consumer context. In this study, the brand Vans features most prominently with both stickers and graffiti, which directly corresponds to Borden’s (2015) commentary on authenticity, where skateboarders regarded Vans as ‘authentic’ as opposed to Nike’s ‘inauthenticity’. In this case, authenticity comes from a commitment to ‘invest in skateboarding rather than change skateboarding into a spectacularized entity’ (60).

Whilst graffiti brand traces that I have recorded show the dominant traces refer directly to product-related brands, the dominant sticker brand traces mostly refer to local skateboard retailers. This demonstrates not only effective marketing on the local retailers’ part but also reveals a preference for skateboarders to choose local ‘authentic’ skater-owned shops rather than online and large retailers (Borden, 2019). Skateboarders, in turn, demonstrate this alignment through the sticker traces that they leave at the skatepark. Donnelly (2006) describes a symbiotic relationship between local skate shops and core skateboarders, where the local skate shop creates an authentic space for the local core skaters to socialise and hang out (571), and the local core skateboarders validate the retailer’s authenticity by choosing to socialise and hang out there. Borden (2019) moves this idea further by suggesting that even skate companies gain authenticity by ‘distributing through these localised outlets’ (55).

The actual sticker traces are indiscriminately pasted around the park and are often worn away beyond any point of recognition as they suffer the wear and tear of a certain ‘line’ (the name of the path that the skater will travel along through a course of obstacles) (Figure 74). When this is the case, the sticker is sometimes barely discernible from the surrounding surface. Such is the habit of laying stickers down that I have found evidence of price tags, barcodes and even band-aids being stuck down around where people sit.

The most common places to find a cluster of stickers is on signage, rubbish bins and poles, areas of the skatepark where the integrity of the trace will be maintained as long as possible. (Figure 75). This in effect turns the authoritarian signage into a colourful visual pastiche.

Figure 73. Brand alignment is a common graffiti theme, (image by author, 2017).
Figure 74. A sticker placed on an obstacle suffers the wear and tear of the ‘line’ on which it has been placed, (image by author, 2015).
Figure 75. Stickers adorn the signage at Waterloo skatepark in Sydney, (image by author, 2014).
Scooter Brand

The relationship between skaters and freestyle scooter riders is tenuous, with the two groups sharing the skatepark space but coming from different cultural disciplines. Freestyle scooters have only been around since 2000, and since this time scooters have grown in popularity to frequently outnumber skaters at the majority of skateparks in Australia and overseas (Gentile, 2018). The visual traces tell a different story. On a superficial level, skateboard-specific sticker traces outnumber scooter 111 to 13, and graffiti traces outnumber 30 to 8 (Figure 76). This might suggest a higher number of skateboarding practitioners, but it seems that there is simply more of a cultural practice within skateboarding to use stickers as a way to mark place and space.

One might conclude then that scooter riding does not carry the same depth/frequency of brand/cultural trace practices that skateboarding does, perhaps due to the comparative young age of the pastime, and possibly due to the differing demographic that scooter riding attracts (Gentile, 2018). A recent Vice magazine article (Passaway, 2018) suggests that scooter riders are generally younger, and tend to give it up earlier than skateboarders. Skaters also accuse scooter riders of not following the proper skatepark etiquette and causing congestion and collisions. It is possible that because there are fewer older scooter riders there is less opportunity for mentorship to younger ones, and to establish the same skateboarding etiquette that exists in skateparks amongst skaters.

Skaters also generally believe that scooter riding doesn’t require the same tenacity and rigour to practice it at a basic level (Kassel, 2017). It is probably for this reason that young children (and parents) gravitate towards scootering, because it is initially easier and safer than learning how to ride a skateboard. Kassel (2017) suggests that at some point scooter riders realise they are engaged in an activity that is deemed to be uncool and quit. At this point, it is challenging to go back to the starting point of learning to skate, so they leave the sport altogether. These retired scooter riders are sometimes considered to be a lost generation of skaters (Kassel, 2017).

Music

Music and skateboarding share a close relationship (Bennett & Peterson, 2004), and music traces appear at skateparks in the form of stickers, graffiti, photographed music events, posters for music events and background music that adds ambience to skate sessions. The skate scene itself even has its own music genres—skate punk, skatecore (Bennett & Peterson, 2004) and more recently, skurban (Ali, 2008). Bands and artists include Suicidal Tendencies, NOFX, Pennywise, Blink-182, The Offspring, Guttermouth, Pharrell Williams and Lupe Fiasco. This is a far cry from Jan and Dean’s 1960s hit ‘Sidewalk Surfin’, an audio representation of the clean-cut, short-lived skateboarding ‘fad’ of the sixties.

Music is often played at skateparks via portable systems brought by the skaters themselves, and organised skate demonstrations and competitions will often have DJs providing music for the event (Waterloo Youth Week Skate and Scooter Jam, 2019). It is also common to see skaters listening to music through headphones while they skate, demonstrating that music is important for the flow and vibe of the session.
In Nowra, New South Wales I chanced upon the set-up of an event called Snake Sessions, funded by the Bundanon Trust (Snake Sessions, 2016). This live art event is a site-specific two-week residency that focuses on regional communities, incorporating music, skateboarding, BMX, parkour and dance, all within the skatepark environment. The residency culminates in a performance event that utilises the local community, putting into practice the skills and techniques that they have learnt during the extent of the residency (Figure 77).

**BMX**

BMX riders are frequent skatepark users and are represented in a variety of traces. In terms of trace frequency, BMX riders are represented the fewest number of times (behind skateboarding and scootering), and this correlates quite closely with the ratio of skatepark users: skateboards and scooters jostle for first position depending on the location, with BMX riders representing the fewest.

Corte (2012) attests to a shared respect that exists between BMX riders and skaters, which is further demonstrated by Tony Hawk including BMX in his Boom Boom HuckJam tour (Gordon, 2002). The vast differences between BMX and skateboard tricks and equipment mean that it is regarded as a completely separate discipline to skateboarding, even though each group shares the same space (Corte, 2012). The overall demographic is more aligned to skating, with skaters and BMX riders tending to be older than scooter riders. Conflicts do occur between skaters and BMXers in some areas, largely due to the impact the heavy bikes have on the skatepark facility where the ‘pegs’ that are an extension of the wheel axels are used for grinding, causing damage to the coping at the lip of the ramp. The general attitude is that BMX riders should not use pegs directly on coping, both concrete and steel, and this extends to control measures where signage might request ‘No Pegs’ in an attempt to mitigate this damage (Figure 78).

**Crossed-out**

Crossed-out is the ninth most frequently occurring code and is interesting in the way that it demonstrates a response to a previous code, usually as an attempt to break any affiliation from whatever was declared. Crossed-out occurs most often with declarations of love as well as defamatory remarks, where the crossed-out individual makes a conscious and physical effort to break themselves apart from their admirer or detractor.

What is often amusing about this particular code is the varying effort that is put into depersonalising the offending commentary, or altering the narrative by substituting one word for another. Frequently the entire declaration is scoured over, making it all but impossible to read, but at other times little effort is made to remove the offending declaration, essentially leaving the remark completely legible (Figure 79), as though the act of striking through is statement enough without having to remove the trace. I have recorded instances where the entire phrase is kept intact but the person’s name has been removed, and conversely, the individual’s name might remain, but the most offensive word(s) might be crossed out.

Narrative changes occur when a word is changed, effectively altering the narrative from negative to positive, or vice versa. Examples of this have been recorded at Jingly, Northern Territory, where ‘I LOVE METH’ has been changed to ‘I LOVE MATHS’ (Figure 80), and a peace-loving activist has changed the oft-occurring ‘FUCK YOU’ to ‘LOVE YOU’. My all-time favourite is at Katoomba skatepark, where the territorial encroachment of ‘MT DRUITT’ has been altered to read ‘MT DROPKICK’ (Figure 81).

![Figure 78. BMX riders have a reputation for being hard on skateparks, (image by author, 2015).](image)

![Figure 79. Billy Roy has not been very successful at erasing this defamatory trace, (image by author, 2016).](image)

![Figure 80. I love maths, or is that meth? (image by author, 2018).](image)

![Figure 81. Mt Dropkick, (image by author, 2012).](image)
In graffiti culture, to cross out, or ‘strike thru’, is a way for one graffiti artist to critique the work of another. This can be due to an artist’s work being deemed novice, unstylish, or out of sync with current trends. Paste-ups and stencils, for example, are sometimes seen as holding lesser value than painted pieces due to a perceived ease of execution, as well a tendency for them to be somewhat ‘trendy’. They lack the history that underpins more traditional forms of graffiti.

Painting graffiti over the top of another piece is considered to be highly disrespectful, a visual indicator of one party devaluing the work of another. Unusually, at of a RIP memorial documented in Taree, New South Wales, the tagger sprayed a postcode over the elaborate epitaph (Figure 82). One might assume this to be a territorial grab of sorts, similar to the many other examples of out-of-area postcodes being tagged on skateparks, until a search revealed that the offending postcode was for Taree itself! Perhaps the offender was not aware that this was the case and came from one of the 39 other townships in the area that share the same postcode.

The crossed-out examples to me demonstrate a mix of human conditions: spite, anger, love, loss, desperation, awareness, empathy, respect and a desire for anonymity. They act as a reply to an otherwise one-way statement, removing power from where it originally lay. What is often regarded as a passive medium is suddenly alive with rebuttals, albeit in the simplest form.

It is worth mentioning two last examples, neither of which include any crossed-out elements but refer to the action nonetheless. In Humpty Doo, Northern Territory, a piece of graffiti records a five-way conversation about a missing girl named Courtney (Figure 83). The piece reads like a tele-novella, complete with an opening scene, calls to action, a heartbreaking conclusion and an epilogue. The exchange resembles a phone group message type of exchange between three or more parties, all being earnestly played out on the green concrete of Humpty Doo skatepark.
High Point

In some of the larger, loftier skateparks I discovered clusters of stickers that were used to indicate the high point of the skateboarders’ trajectory up the larger ramps. In practice the skater will progressively ride higher and higher up a ramp, and with sticker in hand, back peeled off, wait for the dead point where they are no longer going up or down, and paste it as far up the wall as they can reach. This is even more impressive on ramps or ‘cradles’ with an ‘over-vert’ section, which is where the transition begins to curve over the skater’s head like the roof of a cathedral (Figure 84). In order to get a sticker into the over-vert requires the skater to roll into what is fast becoming the ceiling, then pivot and free fall back onto the vertical face and lower angled transition. Similar to historical flood indicators, these high point stickers remain as a marker of the bravest gravity-defying warrior.

Addition

Traces that sit within this theme have been intentionally discarded, either mindlessly, such as rubbish, or quite intentionally, such as hanging shoes. Some items that sit within this theme, specifically the personal items code, are ones that belong to people who were actively using the park at the time of my visit—bags, wallets, keys and other personal items. What we can glean from this data depends on the nature of the found object, for example, rubbish gives us insights into the consumer behaviour around food and beverages (DiCicco, 1996), and personal items shed light on how safe the skatepark is for leaving personal items whilst the owner is engaged in the activity.

Left behind debris is often considered rubbish and junk (Figure 86), but in some cases it is a legacy of connection to the space. Examples include the shoes hanging in the trees at Fitzroy park as a means to connect to place and memory, or abandoned skateboards on the Hungerford Bridge over the River Thames as both an epitaph and political sign of resistance.

Figure 84. Informal pipe pasting, (Badlands Mt Baldy full pipe, 2012).
Figure 85. Formal sticker slap, (sticker slap wallride contest, 2013).
Figure 86. Discarded skateboard trucks, Nerang, Queensland, (image by author, 2017).
Found Object

The trace found object certainly sits in a grey area due to the fact that many of the items that have been documented could potentially fall within a different code; for example, all found objects could be construed as rubbish. Similarly, a bong could reasonably be placed in drugs, but I have maintained a separate code for some ‘found objects’ due to the vast array of types recorded as well as to establish a way of separating references to artefacts that demonstrate an activity took place within the space. For example, there are many written references that relate to sex, sexual activity, and male and female genitalia—181 to be exact—but the discovery of a condom wrapper in Elliot, Northern Territory and a used condom in Thornleigh, New South Wales demonstrate the possibility of sexual activity taking place at the location, not just incessant talk about it. Likewise, of the 48 drug references recorded, the three found objects that relate to drug use demonstrate that drugs were most likely used within the space (Figure 87). These include one drug baggie in Wangaratta, Victoria, numerous soda bulbs in Thornleigh, New South Wales, and one bong in Katoomba, New South Wales of the Orchi bottle variety. (For readers outside of Australia, the Orchi bottle is the archetype of underage drug use/abuse in Australia, which has long been the vessel of choice for making cheap, impromptu bongs.)

Despite the fact that these found objects are many and varied and lack a definitive home in the code matrix, they are valued traces nonetheless as they add to the narrative of the skatepark, shedding light on the users who have frequented the space.

Rubbish

Rubbish at the skatepark consists mostly of discarded food and beverage packaging, discarded items of clothing, miscellaneous items such as cigarette butts and packaging, and broken skate/scooter items. In coding rubbish there is a crossover with found object, which is technically rubbish, but sometimes the intent of discarding a found object is more complex than an unwanted food wrapper.

Generally speaking, skateparks are fairly clean spaces, and whilst I haven’t actively sought out rubbish to document during my field trips, incidental rubbish caught in photographs was coded appropriately. The majority of skateparks exist as public spaces, managed by local government and maintained by whatever waste and maintenance services exist within such organisations. Regular clean-ups are part of every council’s maintenance schedule, but when I questioned the Blue Mountains City Council's recreation team leader, she told me that confusion reigned within the clean-up team due to the fact that Katoomba skatepark sits quite separately to other recreation spaces in the area. Therefore, the team does not clean up the skatepark on a regular basis as they do not consider it fits into their jurisdiction. The skatepark can go weeks without being cleaned, resulting in rubbish accumulating and creating a less than desirable environment for all but the most devout users of the space.

Rubbish in the skatepark not only looks unsightly but, more importantly, becomes a dangerous fall hazard as skateboards can only tolerate the smallest

Figure 87. Zip lock bag resembles something used for drugs, (image by author, 2016).

Figure 88. Skaters clean the skatepark prior to skating, (image by author, 2013).
pieces of foreign material. One minute you’re rolling along and the next you’re flying through the air as your board had come to a screeching halt, wheel locked up stubbornly by some detritus. Skaters remedy this by sweeping away rubbish and gravel found within the skateable area, some including brooms, dustpans and brushes in their skate kit (Figure 88).

Most of the skateparks documented have rubbish bins onsite, but the effectiveness of these facilities is often determined by where they are located. The photograph of Maryborough skatepark litter below (Figure 89) demonstrates how bins that are located near where the skaters congregate are effectively utilised, to the point where they are full to overflowing. Not only does this create a mess but the facility users are labelled as lazy, which possibly affects the overall opinion that the general public have towards skateboarders.

An article in the Fraser Coast Chronicle went so far as to blame the youth involved in the participatory design process of the park for not considering how the users would utilise the bins provided. This is a clear example of unrealistic expectations being placed on these youth, as the waste management design at a skatepark is clearly not their responsibility but rather that of the council’s urban planning team.

Unfortunately the youth who assisted in designing the park did not consider the lack of common sense of some of the skateboarders, bike and scooter riders, who are of all ages and demographic, to walk the couple of extra metres to dump their rubbish in a second bin. (Holmes, 2017)

Brisbane City Council’s A Guideline to Developing and Managing Skate Facilities in Queensland (2002) acknowledges the importance of rubbish bins being in a fixed position, so as to reduce the chance of them being moved and used as skate obstacles. Mention is also made that they must be robust, presumably to withstand the anticipated misuse that can be expected in these environments.

What was clear to me when looking at the photograph that accompanied the article (Figure 89) is that the users obviously congregate where there is shade, as well as a ledge to sit on, so therefore utilise that bin rather than the one in the sun, with no sitting options available. Also, as evidenced in the below photograph from Cowra, facility users are willing to utilise the bins even when the service is not adequately provided (Figure 90).

At Thornleigh skatepark in Sydney, a no-man’s-land between the edge of the skatepark and the train line fence acts as a convenient dumping ground due to the space being out of sight, and as it is difficult to access for council cleaners, the resulting rubbish is overwhelming (Figure 91).

Shoes

When I was growing up, there was an urban myth surrounding the presence of shoes on powerlines, laces tied together and tossed over to dangle alongside the electrocuted fruit bats. Amongst my group of friends, the dangling shoes indicated the presence of a drug house. ‘How stupid of them,’ I thought at the time. ‘If I know that then why don’t the police know it and arrest them?’

Fast-forward 30 years and dangling shoes are still a global phenomenon, with the consensus being that the shoes change meaning from place to place. The award-winning short film The Mystery of Flying Kicks (Papadopoulos, 2009) celebrates the phenomena of shoe tossing, also affectionately referred to as shoefitti (as in shoe + graffiti), and lists many local theories behind the phenomenon. The affectionately documented scenarios include a bullied child who has their shoes forcibly removed then tossed, and is made to suffer a walk home in bare feet; a teenager losing their virginity; a tribute to fallen gang members; and to create a site for reflection, memory and life changes. In the documentary, Professor Marcel Danesi from the University of Toronto states that:

It is connected to memory. A kind of communal, long-lasting memory. It’s as if we live on in memory. And if you think in a certain sense that’s absolutely true. Just the fact that you leave a writing on a wall, or that you leave a shoe somewhere, you have proven to yourself that you exist. (Papadopoulos, 2009)
When assessing the collection of shoe traces in this study, two-thirds documented were in non-urban areas—Mt Isa, Katoomba, Taree, Lithgow, Alice Springs, Grafton and Batemans Bay. Whilst it is unknown how these suspended shoes came to be, a visual and emotional link is created with other urban areas where shoefitti is more commonplace. This demonstrates the ‘stickiness’ of the urban culture that is associated with skateboarding, and the way in which many aspects of the culture travel with the activity.

At Fitzroy skatepark in Melbourne, a tree adjacent to the skatepark is adorned with dozens of pairs of lobbed shoes, not unlike the baubles on a Christmas tree (Figure 92). This shoe graveyard acts as a memory marker that gains strength by being a shared ritual with others who belong to the place.

Similar approaches are documented in Thomas Sweertvaegher’s book, The Journal of a Skateboarder (2018), where tossed shoes and broken skateboard decks adorn the rafters of an indoor DIY skate ramp. What is unique about this space is that it is quite obviously a private, intimate space, and despite this, users are still driven to mark their presence with these discarded relics.

Broken Skateboard Deck

Similar to discarded, dangling shoes, broken skateboard decks have been recorded in a variety of locations. Sometimes these items have been left as rubbish, with no regard paid to how or where they are placed. Other times the broken decks seem to have been placed symbolically as a way to act as a memory marker, a physical dedication to hard skating and a tribute to the skatepark itself.

Broken decks have been documented nine times, and if not for the specific placement of most of these discarded items, one could consider them simply as rubbish. In Katoomba, a broken deck dangles from the powerlines along with the discarded shoes. In Reservoir, Melbourne, a discarded deck is propped against a fence, waiting to be salvaged. In Grafton, a broken deck has been placed in the fork of a tree, which has then grown around the deck, as if returning it back to its source. If it was not for the visible grip tape one might overlook it as a lost limb or tree scar (Figure 93).

The most impressive collection of broken decks, located on the Hungerford Bridge crossing the River Thames close to the Southbank Undercroft, is said to act as a memorial to the London skater Timothy Baxter, or so goes popular belief (Chalmers, n.d.). Murdered in 1999 by a local gang, Timothy had spent

Figure 92. Hanging shoes act as memory markers for members of the local skate community, (image by author, 2016).
the evening skating at Southbank Undercroft and socialising with friends before being attacked, thrown over the bridge and drowned. Timothy’s skateboard was tossed over the bridge shortly before him, and it is perhaps this act that initiated the next. Whilst this story is tragically true, there is no certainty about whether the skateboard graveyard exists as an ‘organic memorial’ (Bell, 2014) to the murdered skater or a memorial to the broken decks themselves. Either way, despite council endeavours to clean up the site, broken decks reappear soon after each attempt.

The collection of broken skateboard decks on Hungerford Bridge also symbolises the importance of the nearby Southbank Undercroft and the longstanding fight to preserve the space as a skate spot. The broken decks clearly spell out LLSB—Long Live South Bank—the name of the successful campaign that secured its future for skateboarding (Borden, 2019) (Figure 94).

Retired skateboards adorn a tree in Whitby, Ontario as a memorial to Douglas Vickary, who tragically drowned in a boating accident. Local newspaper reports describe skaters and non-skaters descending on the skatepark as news broke about Vickary’s passing.

‘We got here on Sunday afternoon and within 20 minutes, people started showing up and it was just a huge crowd of non-skateboarders.’ (Pessian, 2012)

In Dallastown, Pennsylvania, skateboards also adorn a tree, but this time not to commemorate the young skater who the park is dedicated to but to act as sign of defiance against a street gang that had targeted the park, committing a string of violent crimes including armed robberies (Thornton, 2019).

For many skaters, myself included, it is difficult to let go of an old faithful deck, and as a result they are kept and valued for the history and memories that each contains. Mine are screwed to the underside of the ceiling rafters at home, and each deck marks a different point in my skateboarding career: in my younger years the decks were narrow and more street-orientated; now, broader decks are more suitable to the softer transition style that has made skateboarding into middle-age possible. Likewise, the appreciation of skateboard graphics, which is a major decider when purchasing a new deck, give greater cause for holding on to and valuing a retired deck.

Shopping Trolley

When I lived in Newcastle, New South Wales, I played social soccer in a team called the Throsby Trolleys. The name reflected the abandoned shopping trolleys in our local creek and epitomised our varying (lack of) abilities and dishevelled appearances. Throsby Creek itself acts as a drain for some of the most depressed communities in Newcastle, where oyster-encrusted shopping trolleys appear like animal bones amongst the mangroves in the stink of low tide, only to disappear again upon the turn.
Whilst a shopping trolley is at home in the immediate vicinity of a shopping centre, when confronted with one in a creek, abandoned block or even a suburban street, it is natural to ponder the journey it has taken to get to its eventual resting place. Instinct and assumption suggest that the trolley has been used to carry items from the shops by somebody who doesn’t have the luxury of a car, and once the destination is reached it is simply discarded. The journey back is not worth the gold coin deposit that would reward its eventual return.

A discarded shopping trolley at a skatepark holds a different narrative. It speaks of the youthful mischievousness of late-night trolley rides through the streets, with the skatepark as an eventual destination for hanging out. It speaks of an obstacle that one may ollie over, grind on, jump off. It speaks of an anti-authoritative attitude towards rules and regulations that would frown at innocent shopping trolleys being used for the purpose of fun (Figure 95).

**Personal Items**

The documenting of personal items at skateparks reveals much about what people carry on themselves and how they carry their items, but also where they place these items when they are occupied by skateboarding. My initial observations showed that specific parts of the skatepark become hang-out zones, where people and possessions accumulate. It is also common to find these areas attracting the bulk of conversational graffiti, which tends to be offensive and defamatory.

The take-home message from this captured trace is that most facility users have a variety of possessions that they need to leave somewhere while they skate. Common practice is to place these in a shared space and trust that the items will remain safe and secure. Mobile telephones and wallets are largely unattended and faith is placed in the goodwill of other users not to pilfer or tamper with their possessions. It’s hard to imagine the same trust placed in many other environments, a pub or club, for example, let alone environments that are routinely described as being risky and attracting antisocial behaviour.

Skatepark users are more likely to leave their possessions in an undesignated (non-seating) spot, that is, close to where they are skating rather than utilising one of the designated seating areas that are often out of their line of sight.

**Sign**

As mentioned previously, sign is the most frequently recorded trace and refers to the signage that can be found at most skateparks. These information, welcome or safety signs are often badly defaced, so much so that it is difficult if not impossible to read them. One might question whether they are being used by the defacer simply as another opportunity to leave a mark or are perhaps targeted to send a deeper message about skater attitudes towards being told what to do by the authorities (Figures 96, 97, 98). Even in the law-abiding city of Singapore, where graffiti crimes can end in a jail term, signage at the centrally located Somerset Park has been spray painted.

**Safety**

Most of the abovementioned signs spell out that skateboarding may be hazardous so participants should take care (in red capitals at Brunswick Heads, to be sure the message is not lost). Most signs also provide emergency contact numbers, which is useful when a supervising parent tries to relive their youth (speaking from experience). Some signs insist that the user must wear safety equipment at all times, including helmet, kneepads, elbow pads and suitable footwear. Others demand that just helmets must be worn at all times, or ‘suggest’ that wearing safety equipment might be advisable. Based on informal observation,
most skateboarders use no protective equipment whatsoever, while some scooter and BMX riders wear helmets only. Other signs use visual representations to issue directives such as no smoking, no fires, no cars and no guns (or perhaps it is no hunting, the icon is ambiguous). Whilst the purpose of such signs is to communicate safety information by the council (and probably also to minimise liability), some directives seem misguided and in turn have the effect of negating the directives of a more reasonable nature.

At Orange skatepark in rural New South Wales, signage includes an infographic of someone rollerblading, a very rare sight at Australian skateparks and an image that a skateboarder may find offensive. It is not that rollerbladers do not exist, but amongst skatepark users they do not in any way represent the majority—or hardly any of the users, for that matter (Figure 99).

At Singapore’s Rishan Road Skatepark the signage refers to a ‘skateboard court’, as though skateboarding exists in similar environments to tennis, netball and basketball. These examples are evidence of a disconnect between the managing bodies dictating the rules and the intended user, the skateboarder, who is part of a culture that they do not fully understand.

Future Directions

This research focuses on found visual traces and how they give insights into historic, geographical, social and physical aspects of skateboarding communities and skateparks. Beyond the scope of this research but an area for further investigation is exploring if broader community health determines the health of a skatepark, and whether this is reflected in visual traces found at the skatepark.

Besleme and Mullin (1997) describe how community indicators can ‘clearly identify which areas a community is adequately addressing and which areas require additional attention’ (46). Whilst not yet determined, examples of community indicators specific to a skatepark may include graffiti (styles and prevalence), the presence of rubbish, distance from public transport, infrastructure damage and vandalism.

Vinson’s (2007) report _Dropping Off the Edge_ provides valuable groundwork on community indicators and how they may be used to paint a portrait of community health. Five indicators were used to rank 647 communities in New South Wales (expressed by postcode), which included:

- Social distress;
- Health;
- Community safety;
- Economic; and
- Education.

Each community was ranked by indicator data, with the lowest-scoring communities being recommended for effective intervention. Using this information it would interesting to compare and contrast skateparks within communities that span the spectrum from disadvantaged through to advantaged and discover how community health is reflected through visual traces found at skateparks.

Finally, I can also see great potential to use this research approach for more focused studies, not only for skateparks but also other cultural sites where visual traces can be recorded and analysed. The systematic, non-invasive process of applying codes to visual stimuli lends itself to both active geographic locations such as a skatepark as well as passive archival sites, such as publications and photo libraries.
Conclusion

This research project was born from my experiences of being an active (albeit somewhat vintage) skateboarder, a parent to three children who all frequent skateparks, and a member on a steering committee for a new skatepark in my local area. The variety of experiences that I have lived as a skateboarder led me to question the position that skateboarding holds in my immediate social community, on a governmental level, in academia, as well as in the creative arts community.

Initial research gave me an appreciation for the history of skateboarding as an activity and allowed me to better understand the complex culture and lifestyle that has become synonymous with it. Indeed, it is the extraordinary uniqueness of this lifestyle sport that attracts participants. Skateboarders tend to be those who don’t quite fit into or actively buck the mainstream, which in turn creates a popular perception that skateboarders are anti-authoritarian risk-takers, a reputation that is sometimes well deserved and sometimes not. This places skateboarding, and the spaces that skateboarders occupy, on society’s fringes.

Whilst my early creative approach leant heavily towards presenting the skatepark environment as a space of unexpected beauty, the audience for these images was limited, which reduced the capacity for any real attitude change. This resulted in a shift of focus away from the subjective aesthetic towards the objective mundane, and the narratives and information that could be gleaned from the vast image library that resulted after surveying 136 skateparks.

In order to frame the research, Borden’s definitions of found space and constructed space provided me with an academic context within which to anchor my own category of spatial definition—the reconstructed space. This reconstructed space contains the visual traces that I have photographed and analysed, which add a new dimension to previous research around skatepark design and development. These visual traces tell of the mundane, the compelling, the heartbreaking, the loves, the hates and the defiance of youth, cultural narratives that mark this space as being crucially important to its users. The RIP testimonials define the space as a shrine, high point stickers as a site for rites of passage, and physical alterations to the landscape itself as space to practice entrepreneurship and to exercise a vision that transcends the original design and construction. The recurrence of these traces from site to site, country to country, proves that this is not an isolated phenomenon but that skater communities on a global level speak with a visual voice that represents creativity, nurture and defiance. This, in turn, fosters a sense of place and assists in creating a culturally rich space that skaters can call their own.

Over the life of this project I have discovered meaningful traces that I have read and interpreted, which have built my appreciation for a latent and often hidden side to the skateboarding community. I am honoured that my images may assist in helping others—councils, planners and the public—to also see in a new way, and realise this different view. Rather than seeing skateparks solely as functional sporting venues, they should instead be seen, developed and nurtured as vital cultural zones that contribute positively to the physical, social and cultural wellbeing of the young people who use these spaces.

Figure 100. Lawson shadow, (image by author, 2014).
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Figure 101. (overleaf). Graffiti detail, Wangaratta, Victoria, (image by author, 2016).

Skateparks: Trace and Culture is a visual ethnographic study of the social and environmental interactions that take place in skateparks across the world. Completely devoid of the human subject, the photographs focus instead on the traces of use that are left behind by users of the space.

From the inane to the deeply personal, from the city to the country, from the marginalised to the connected, recurring visual traces shed light on the significant role that skateparks play in youth culture. Social and cultural typologies identify the depth of key moments, objects, and connections that the users have in this space.

This expansive body of work attests that skateboarding contains a complex set of social and cultural practices that extend way beyond the physical act of skateboarding. Photographs captured from over 130 skateparks, spanning six countries, further demonstrate the central role skate parks play in underpinning and developing youth culture.
WARNING

"High Risk Activities"
The Skate Bowl is suitable for experienced skaters.

SKATE AT YOUR OWN RISK.

f*ck DaPolice!
fuck the Police

F UK DA POLICE!
Fuck
The
Police

Fuck you

FUCK YOU

OPENHANDSLAPS.COM

fucked
you
fucked
you
Fuck life. I hate it.

Fuck my life.
I'm not happy 😞
NOTICE

General Manager
algett Shire Council

Competition and conservation of the environment under Section 63 of the Local Government Act 1999

INTEREST OF SAFETY

No. 3 for skateboards, BMX bikes and other motorised vehicles. Please be considerate, clean up and always wear a helmet.

THEries FOR

ACK STE
EDBOUND

RIDGEOUS JOS
ACK MCY

RD - DR
IV CAME
THE
FEND

#SKATEKIDS

Someone needs

to find Courtney

The schools he's dealing

school kids Down in.

bro's home to Bruce. Down

and I need her so much.

Please let Courtney

and I know she'll know.

Teddy Bear

I don't love you

Please more on.

C. Congreene

The girl was

found. It was me.

Dominique was was

missing. Bob

courtney

Please Don't Ride This

cut

"Teddy Bear"
Love you.
PLEASE DO NOT FEED THE SKATERS
Grafitti – Other

Grafitti – Brand Other

Indigenous

Crossed Out

Indigenous

Direction

Territorial

Smiley Face

Political/Social/Lyrical

RP

Love

RP

Full

Full

Full

Full

Full