

# Wild in the Streets

Skateboarding  
and  
Hostile Design



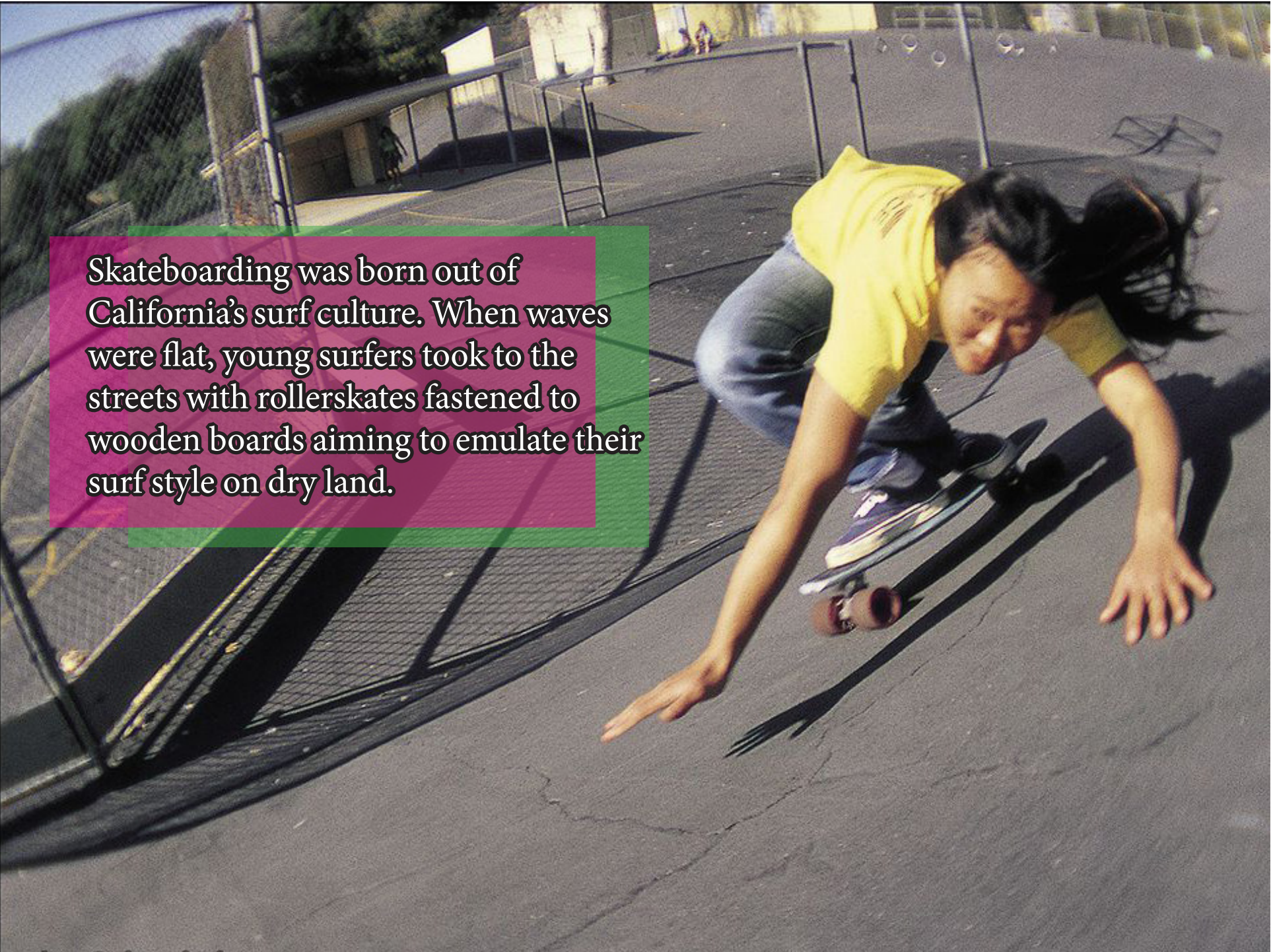
## Part 1: Street Skateboarding



Mark Gonzales  
Photo by Paul Mittleman

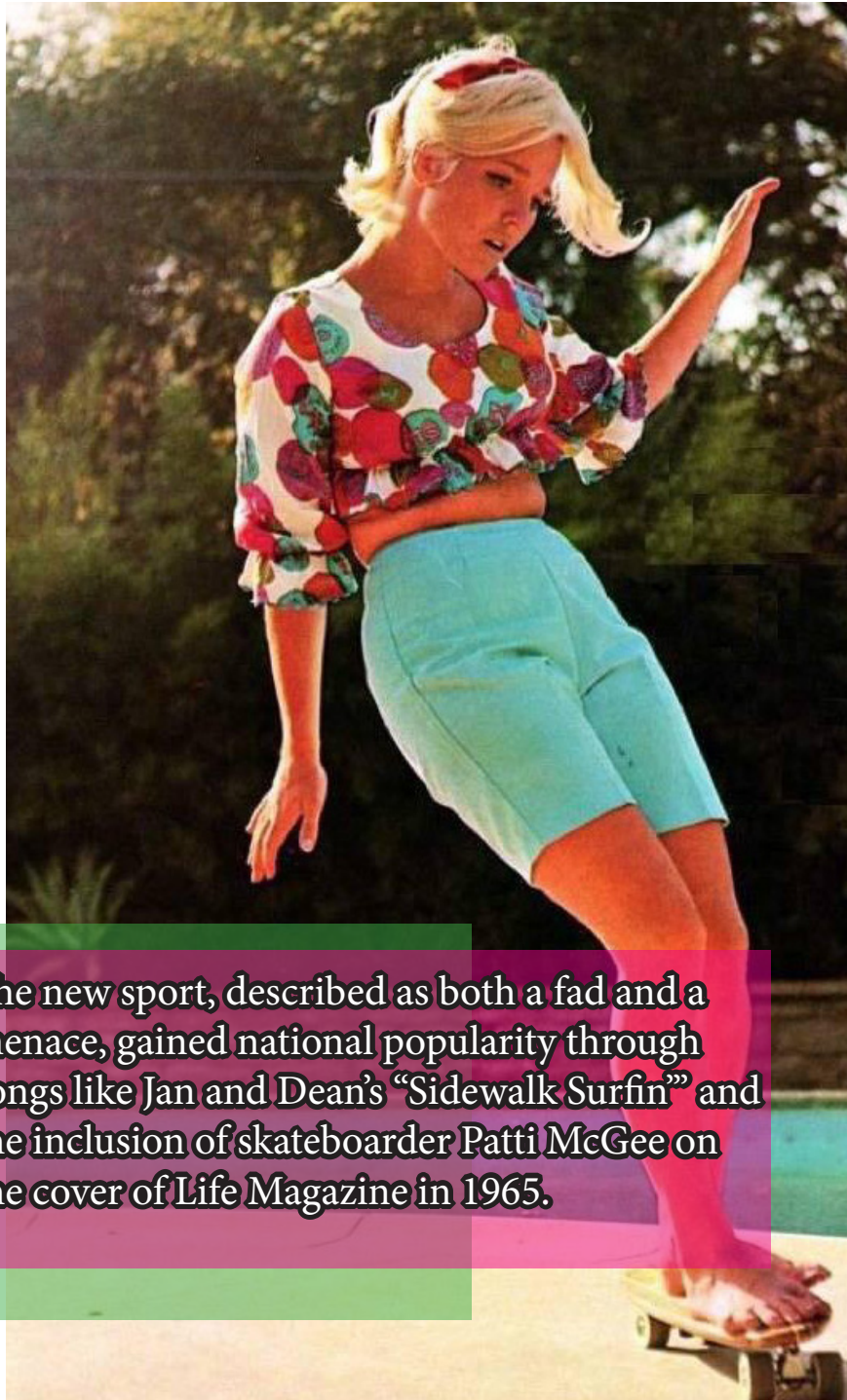
Street skateboarding refers to skateboarding done in public spaces. The style utilizes handrails, parking blocks, benches, walls, and just about any other surface that one could think of. In the 1980's, street skateboarding pioneers like Mark Gonzales and Natas Kaupas ushered in this style that would soon take over not only skateboarding culture, but countless public spaces all over the world. Ocean Howell, a professor of Architectural History and former professional skateboarder describes skateboarding as a spatial practice, or "an everyday activity that challenges commercial space" (Howell, 17). This reinterpretation of public space has proven controversial to this day, with certain designers and municipalities taking drastic measures to ensure skateboarders stay out. This zine will examine the history of street skateboarding and the architectural response to this "spatial practice".



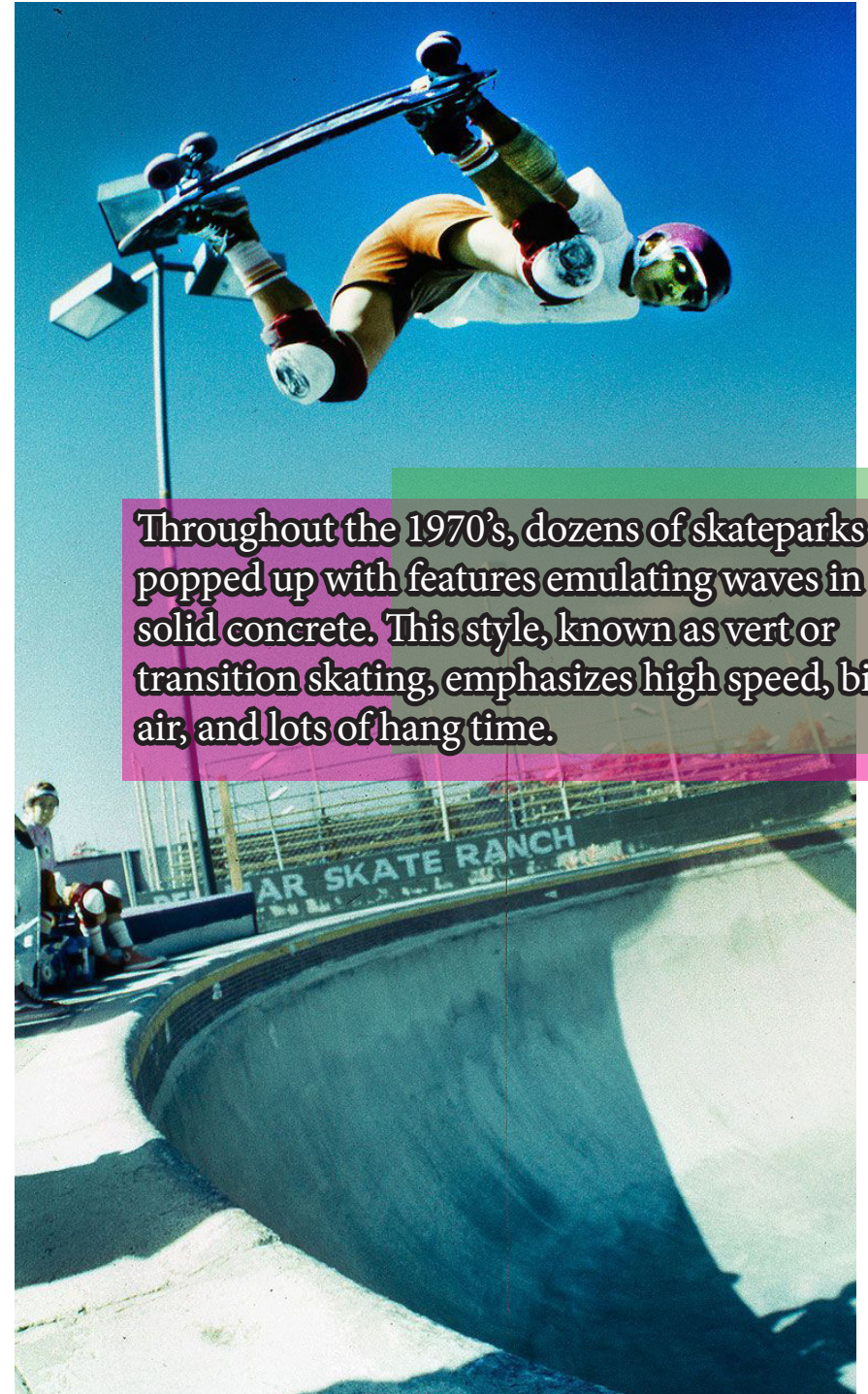


Skateboarding was born out of California's surf culture. When waves were flat, young surfers took to the streets with rollerskates fastened to wooden boards aiming to emulate their surf style on dry land.





The new sport, described as both a fad and a menace, gained national popularity through songs like Jan and Dean's "Sidewalk Surfin'" and the inclusion of skateboarder Patti McGee on the cover of Life Magazine in 1965.



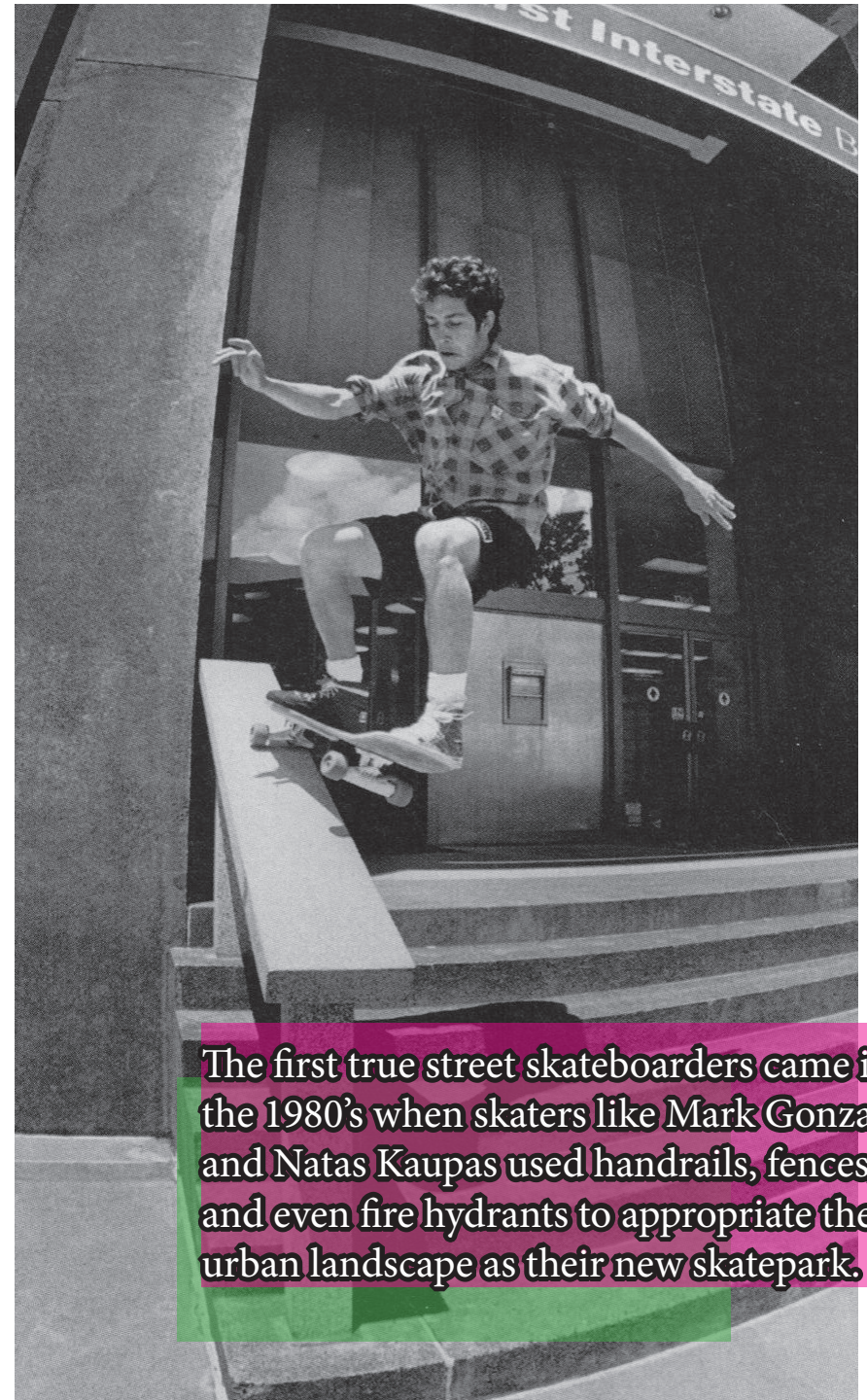
Throughout the 1970's, dozens of skateparks popped up with features emulating waves in solid concrete. This style, known as vert or transition skating, emphasizes high speed, big air, and lots of hang time.



As the sport's popularity waned, many skateparks were torn down, leaving skateboarders to figure out what kind of space they could occupy within society.



With advancements in the design and quality of wheels, trucks, boards, and shoes, skateboarders figured out how to get themselves off the ground without the help of purpose-built skate ramps.



The first true street skateboarders came in the 1980's when skaters like Mark Gonzales and Natas Kaupas used handrails, fences, and even fire hydrants to appropriate the urban landscape as their new skatepark.



Throughout the 80's and 90's, street skating became increasingly controversial. 101's famous "Devil Worship" deck poked fun at the rumor that Natas (coincidentally "Satan" spelled backwards) was a devil worshipper. Parents were not pleased.



Many municipalities, city planners, and architects soon decided that public space must be designed in a way that discourages acts like skateboarding and other unwelcome uses of public space.

Now heavily associated with controversial board graphics, similarly controversial punk rock music, and social delinquency, street skateboarding was a menace more than ever before.


## Part 2: Hostile Design



A form of “Skatestopper” found in Ireland  
Photographer Unknown

Hostile design, also called disciplinary architecture, or defensive urban design, describe an urban-design strategy that aims to discourage certain behaviors like public urination, sleeping, loitering, or skateboarding. One of the most prevalent anti-skateboarding strategies is in use of the “Skatestopper”. These are devices such as metal brackets, rivets, or even cleverly designed sculptures that discourage skateboarders from grinding and sliding along ledges. Some see skaters as vandals, junkies, a nuisance. In response, one skater stated, “We don’t go out of our way to damage stuff-- we’re just using it. We enjoy the stuff that nobody else even notices. What’s wrong with that?” (Woolley, 226)





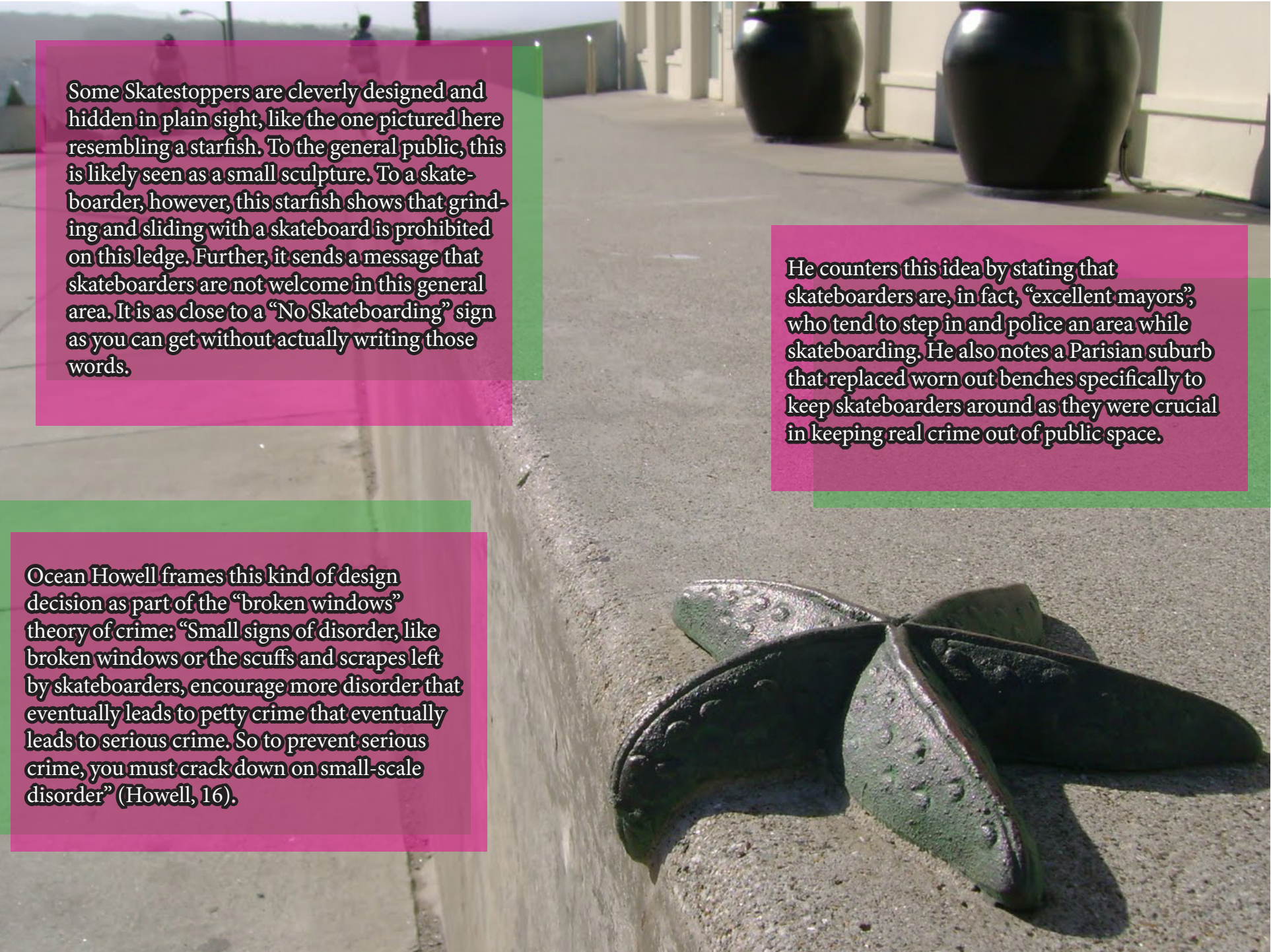
Hostile architecture has been prevalent for decades and is often associated with anti-camping, anti-homeless initiatives. Further, hostile design aims to surveil, to control, to keep up a certain image, to support certain activities, and to prohibit others.

Similarly, measures often intended to prevent skateboarding because it is deemed criminal do not prevent skaters from picking up their boards and finding spots to skate around the city. Skateboarding has been described as “one form of popular culture that resists capitalist social relations” (Beal, 1995) and, in turn, is seen as a threat to the status quo.

While hostile design may have varying degrees of success in different parts of the world, these design strategies ultimately do nothing to address the problems they aim to hide. The man pictured to the right is presumably homeless, and still manages to fall asleep despite the hostile design of the bench. He’s unable to lie down, yet he remains homeless and in need of sleep.

Man Sleeps on Tokyo Bench  
Photo by Yuya Shino





Some Skatestoppers are cleverly designed and hidden in plain sight, like the one pictured here resembling a starfish. To the general public, this is likely seen as a small sculpture. To a skateboarder, however, this starfish shows that grinding and sliding with a skateboard is prohibited on this ledge. Further, it sends a message that skateboarders are not welcome in this general area. It is as close to a “No Skateboarding” sign as you can get without actually writing those words.

He counters this idea by stating that skateboarders are, in fact, “excellent mayors”, who tend to step in and police an area while skateboarding. He also notes a Parisian suburb that replaced worn out benches specifically to keep skateboarders around as they were crucial in keeping real crime out of public space.

Ocean Howell frames this kind of design decision as part of the “broken windows” theory of crime: “Small signs of disorder, like broken windows or the scuffs and scrapes left by skateboarders, encourage more disorder that eventually leads to petty crime that eventually leads to serious crime. So to prevent serious crime, you must crack down on small-scale disorder” (Howell, 16).







One of the most iconic spaces for skateboarding is Philadelphia's Love Park, officially titled John F. Kennedy Plaza. Designed by Edmund Bacon in the 1960's, Love Park became a skateboarding mecca in the 1990's where dozens of skateboarders built their careers, and countless fans came to witness their athleticism.

Despite being an economic boon and contributing to a safer environment in downtown Philadelphia, skateboarding was never legal in Love Park until the final weekend before it was demolished in 2018 and replaced with a park designed to keep skaters out.





Edmund Bacon, designer of Love Park, urged Philadelphia's mayor to go to hell before he rode a skateboard through the park at the age of 92 in defiance of the longstanding ban on skateboarding. Likewise, park architect Vincent Kling stated that "I built this place so that people could enjoy it. That includes skateboarders."



"My whole damn life has been worth it, just for this moment," Bacon said.

Edmund Bacon, himself, is proof that the appropriation of public space for new and exciting uses is to be welcomed. A skateboard is just as valid a member of the public space as those looking to each lunch or take a walk. Helen Woolley and Ralph Johns state that "Skaters inject youth and dynamism into the city, challenging accepted definitions of space and social logic and redefining what we understand the city to mean" (Woolley, 227). If we are to kick skateboarders out of public space, we are only attempting to silence and criminalize a vibrant, thriving, and misunderstood culture that wants nothing more than to be accepted.



## References:

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McQuade, Dan. "That Time Ed Bacon Skateboarded Across LOVE Park." *Philadelphia Magazine*, Philadelphia Magazine, 14 Feb. 2016, [www.phillymag.com/news/2016/02/14/love-park-ed-bacon-skateboarding-video/](http://www.phillymag.com/news/2016/02/14/love-park-ed-bacon-skateboarding-video/).



**Thomas McBroom is a lifelong skateboarder from Jupiter, Florida. As a child, he learned to skate at the Jupiter Skatepark and grew up to work as a manager of the park. While there he managed a youth skate team and organized several skateboarding contests and events. He is pursuing a degree in English from the University of Florida and hopes to work as a writer within the skateboarding industry since the whole "professional skateboarder" thing hasn't worked out... yet.**



