

**“Milton Keynes Architecture, Urban Design and Skateboarding,” in Caterina Loriggio and Ben Powell (eds.), *MK Skate*, (Milton Keynes: MK Skate, 2020), pp. 8-11.**

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In design terms, Milton Keynes is a unique example of architectural and urban design in the UK. No other town in the country has been as radically and comprehensively guided by modernist principles – form following function, minimalist rectilinearity, modern materials and construction, rational gridded layout, separation of mobility types – thus creating an unrivalled territory for skateboarding. In short, the particular buildings and public spaces of Milton Keynes have given rise to a highly intensive and innovative explosion of skateboarding.

So exactly did this come about? To begin with, hardly at all. During the 1970s and 1980s, when many of the town’s most prominent new buildings were being completed, skateboarding was being most actively promoted in purpose-built skateparks (late 1970s) and, after most of these skateparks had closed down, above ground half-pipes (1980s). During this time, Milton Keynes riders used its sprawling flat surfaces as places to learn to ride the basics of standing, pushing and turning, but for anything more advanced they had to travel elsewhere, to skateparks like Skateopia at Knebworth and Wicksteed Park at Kettering, or half-pipes in Oxford, Hertford and Stevenage.

But in the 1980s something new was also afoot. Realising that you don’t actually need special terrains for extraordinary skateboarding, riders across the world – from California to Melbourne, from Philadelphia to Tokyo – were discovering that ledges, benches, planters, steps, hand-rails, fire hydrants and all the other seemingly banal elements of the urban environment. In particular, American riders like Eric Dressen, Mark Gonzales, Tommy Guerrero and Natas Kaupas were adapting the vert rider’s ollie (no handed aerial) for flat-ground purposes, so letting them ride up, along and over almost any part of the city. ‘I attempt to make everything skateable,’ proclaimed Kaupas, ‘walls, curbs, ramps, whatever.’<sup>1</sup> In 1987, *Thrasher* magazine confidently declared that skateboarding could engage with a seventy-two element list of features, encompassing everything from alleys, benches and dumpsters and to mail boxes, planters and sewer pipes.<sup>2</sup>

And this is where Milton Keynes steps to the fore. In a famous academic critique of modernist architecture, entitled 'Notes on the New Town', the French marxist philosopher Henri Lefebvre castigates these kinds of modernist utopias as 'spatial degree zero' where everything has only a functional, predictable and organized quality, and where urban experience is reduced to the reading of signs.<sup>3</sup> Similarly, in 1984 British architect-planner Francis Tibbalds described Milton Keynes as 'bland, rigid, sterile, and totally boring', as 'uniform, boring, and uninformative' and generally being devoid of any 'sense of place'.<sup>4</sup> And yet, as Lefebvre presciently predicted in his essay, it is also exactly from this very kind of architecture and urbanism that new, innovative and stimulating forms of city life could and indeed did arise.

Above all, in Milton Keynes skaters discovered exactly the kind of object-space-object-space spatial rhythm that perfectly suits the needs and desires of their new street-based skateboarding. No longer in search of the sinuous trajectories of skateparks, and freed from the standardised curvature of half-pipes, these riders sought out the open flat spaces in and out of the Centre:MK shopping centre, the six-stair and Pritchard Gap of The Beige office building, five-stair of the Food Court, black bars and long granite block of the bus station and curvy bench of the theatre district. More generally, and in keeping with urban theorist Melvin Webber's dictum that new towns like Milton Keynes should offer a non-hierarchical 'order in diversity – community without propinquity', riders exploited a ridiculous of similar skatespots right across the town.<sup>5</sup> As Dean Edwards declares in Linday Knight's wonderful skate documentary *I Heart MK (2006)*, Milton Keynes was a veritable Mecca for skateboarding. 'We just knew it was a new city, so there must be so many unexplored skate spots. We just went from spot to spot to spot, going "oh my god", look at this!'

As one might expect, this kind of perfect street-skating terrain has generated some equally amazing local riders, Rob Selley, Sean Smith, James Bush and Alex deCunha to name but four. Top riders like UK's Tom Penny, Mike Manzoori, Mark Baines and Phil Chapman plus America's Zered Bassett, Jason Dill, Brian Wenning, Brian Anderson, Mike Carroll and Cairo Foster also showed up to revel in Milton Keynes's spectacular delights. In Leo Sharp and Wig Worland, the scene also generated two of the UK's best known skate photographers, while skater-turned renowned artist James Jessop is yet another creative product.

Nor was this just a simple act of pure pleasure. I explore in more detail in *Skateboarding and the City (2019)*, this kind of street skateboarding mounts a performative critique of cities and public space, the skater using their whole body (muscles, balance, hearing, acute vision) to question what are cities are for, how they might be consumed, and by who. This is

serious stuff, and is often countered by those with other agendas to promote and protect, and leading to situations of discord and conflict. Hence the introduction, in the early 2000s, of anti-skate measures at The Beige and elsewhere, and a reassertion of the rights of property, consumerism and privatisation.

In this sense, Milton Keynes street skateboarding provides yet another example of Lefebvre's understanding of modern cities, namely that urban space is a social product, born out of the human activity, and so is always going to be a place of multiple and often competing desires and actions. Here skateboarding emerges as an almost counter-cultural act, flying in the face of normative values, and with skaters keen to carve out a distinctive social space of their own.

Yet this is not where the story of modern architecture and skateboarding Milton Keynes ends. Amid conflict and contestation, reconciliation and negotiation can also arise, as occurred with the hugely innovative and influential Buszy. This project is described in more detail elsewhere in this book, but for here it is worth noting that it forms a precursor not only to the street plazas and streetcourses commonly found in most skateparks worldwide, many of which have been directly inspired by the Buszy, but also to the more recent emergence of skateable spaces, that is sections of public space which are not in any way meant only for skaters, but which welcome skateboarding as one of the many activities which might take place. Here is perhaps the essence of MK architecture and skateboarding, namely the creative tension between a specific kind of place and a unique form of urban experience, and which have together have co-produced a truly remarkable coming together of concrete, skateboards and people.

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<sup>1</sup> Natas Kaupas, interview, *Thrasher*, v.8 n.5 (May 1988), p. 65.

<sup>2</sup> 'Everything Under the Sun', *Thrasher*, v.7 n.6 (June 1987), pp. 56–9.

<sup>3</sup> Lefebvre, *Introduction to Modernity*, pp. 116–26.

<sup>4</sup> Francis Tibbald, 'Milton Keynes: Who Forgot the Urban Design?', *Places*, v.1 n.4 (1984), p. 27.

<sup>5</sup> Melvin Webber, 'Order in Diversity: Community without Propinquity' in Lowdon Wingo, (ed.), *Cities and Space: the Future Use of Urban Land*, (Baltimore, John Hopkins University Press, 1963), pp. 62-93.