

Iain Borden

Skateparks are complex, conflictual and contested spaces. Here I track how this complexity has been manifested in London's Crystal Palace skatepark, where, as we shall see, several different conditions (heritage, campaigns, planning, designs, riders, cultures etc.) all came together, and with alternating arrangements of harmony, chance and negotiation.

## CRYSTAL PALACE SKATEPARK: COMPLEXITY AND CONTRADICTION



1977 UK National Championships. *Skateboard Special*, Issue 1 (September 1977).

### History

Skateboarding started at Crystal Palace park in the 1970s, when its sweeping paths proved ideal for new riders. In 1977, the first UK national championships were hosted, and during the 1980s a skater-constructed above-ground wooden half-pipe attracted skateboarders from far afield. Today, skaters exploit the park's accommodating tarmac for longboarding, slalom and other high-speed runs. All of this had to be acknowledged and incorporated in later designs and planning applications for the skatepark.

### Activism

By 2014, Crystal Palace park was clearly an ideal venue for one of the numerous skateparks then being built across the UK. A few locals – notably Jakub Grocia and Curtis O'Dell – started a Facebook petition, distributed flyers and developed initial designs with skatepark builder Wheelscape. This activism gained significant support from skaters, but still required substantial public and official backing.

### Serendipity and funding

A massive stroke of luck occurred, when Chinese billionaire Ni Zhaoxing's plans to rebuild the park's famous Joseph Paxton-designed Crystal Palace building (destroyed by fire in 1936) as a hotel and conference centre were stymied by planning complexities. To off-set the London Borough of Bromley's loss of income, in 2015 the Greater London



Crystal Palace Skatepark Campaign Flyer, 2015, Facebook.

Authority awarded £1.84 million for park regeneration. Consequently, the

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skatepark campaigners found £400,000 being given to their project, all courtesy of a curious intersection of global finance and local politics.

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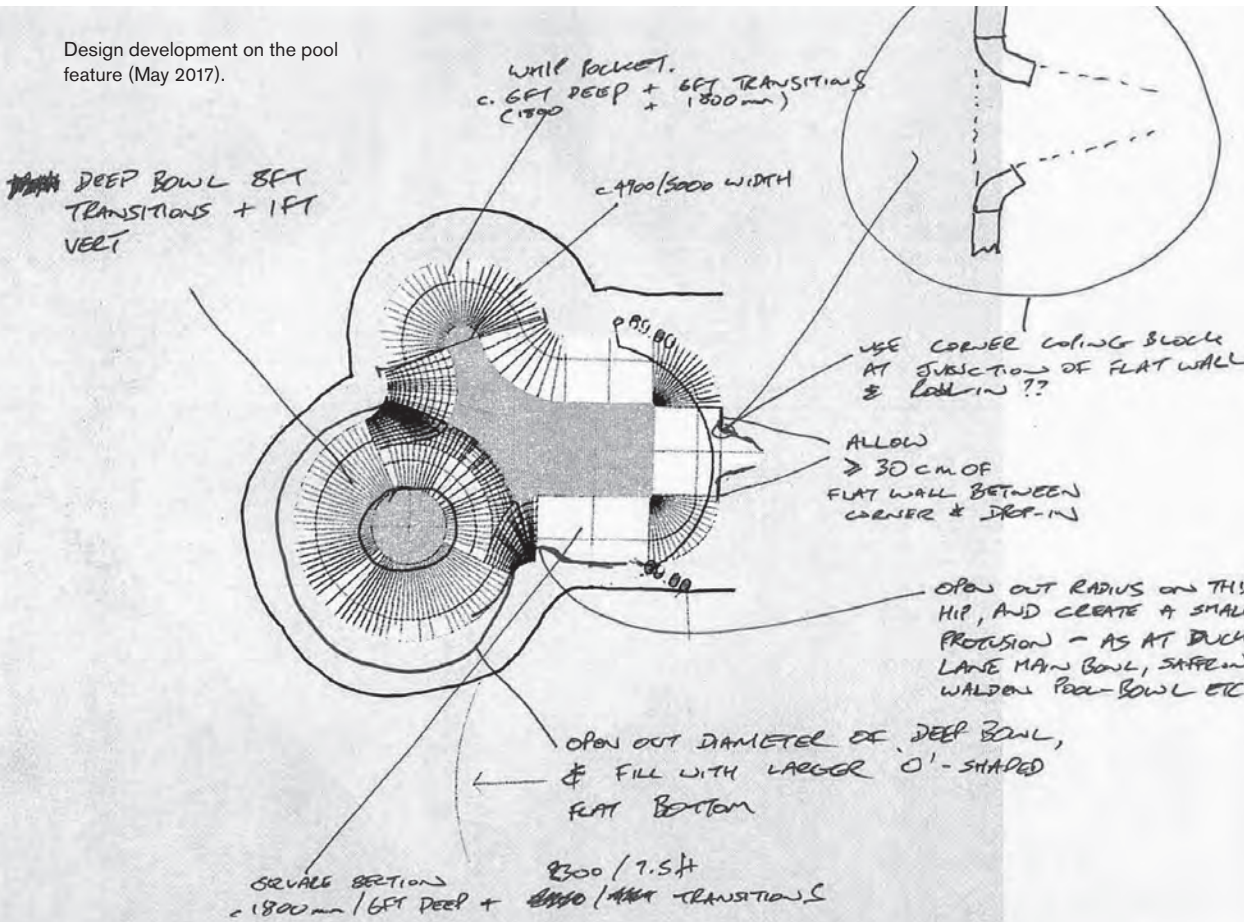
*Designers, builders and users*

Following a protracted tender process, Canvas became the skatepark designers and builders, working with landscape architects KLA, and a four-person User Group (Curtis, Jakob, BMX-rider Colin Austin, and myself), with Bromley as the client. Canvas's initial designs were intensely

reworked, variously involving user inputs, heritage (the skatepark sits over Paxton-designed fountains), cost-sensitivity, and a pressing timeline. We had to balance personal preferences (not all skateboarders like the same terrain), immediate social groups (what would our friends say?) and the skatepark's wider appeal (would it suit those who are younger, older, less experienced, professional, on inline skates, wheelchair users etc.?). And how would the project complement skateparks regionally? Could it be unique, yet not overly specialised?

My role as a locally-living skater and academic was particularly conflicted. Adding to Crystal Palace skate history, and getting something I would

Design development on the pool feature (May 2017).

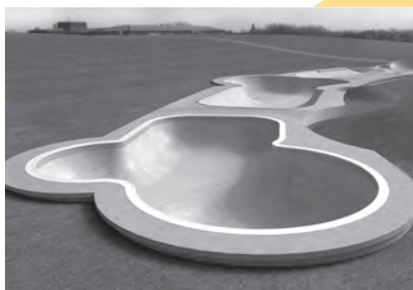




## Crystal Palace Skatepark: Complexity and Contradiction



Pool construction by Canvas, November 2017. Photo by Iain Borden.



Final design Crystal Palace skatepark, September 2017. Courtesy Canvas.

personally enjoy had to be balanced against wider skate contexts alongside intellectual, theoretical and political dimensions. As a historian of skateboarding, I was well aware of the many skatepark precedents and possibilities for the new facility, not least that we wanted to create London's first full tile-and-coping pool for over 40 years (the last was at Rom skatepark in 1978). Alongside the thoughts of philosophers like Henri Lefebvre, Chantal Mouffe and Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi – offering conceptualisations of bodily, political and mental space – were more everyday but equally important factors regarding the diversity of riding surfaces and users. Not all of this could be perfectly integrated and accommodated, but it had to be at least considered.

### *Final design*

Crystal Palace skatepark incorporates a tile-and-coping pool, a large BMX-friendly bowl, and shallow slopes particularly suitable for younger riders. Excluded are steps, rails and other street features; and myriad roll-ins and overhangs were left out for cost reasons. The park is decidedly oriented towards experienced 'transition' riders, but also accommodates those with different preferences and expertise. In short, design emerged here as an amalgam of desires and compromises.



Summer Jam, August 2018. Photo by Iain Borden.



Wings Chan, June 2018. Photo by Iain Borden.



After school skaters, April 2018. Photo by Iain Borden.

### *Skatepark life*

Officially opened in March 2018, the skatepark was well-received by skaters, community workers, local residents and politicians alike, and unusual convergences of politics and peoples were now occurring. The skatepark attracts users of all ages, genders, ethnicities, sexualities and levels of expertise. People visit it to ride, hang out, or just watch; those strolling by invariably remark on the positive contribution it has made to the park as a whole.

And yet, all is not perfect in this seeming Garden of Eden. Some welcome the arrival of gritty graffiti (some by the skaters themselves), while others think it obscures the riding surface. Wooden fences are up-rooted and burned for illicit late-night barbecues. Heavy weed-smoking among some twenty-some-things borders on the endemic. The skatepark users are predominantly male, and homophobic remarks are occasionally thrown at scooter riders. As good as the skatepark design might be, much hard work is still to come, for this place of on-going social and spatial negotiation.

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