From noisy coexistence to inclusion-through-resistance:

(Re)placing youth at London's 'Southbank' skate spot

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Context:

The Southbank Centre, the UK's largest complex of Arts institutions which occupies a 7 hectare (17 acre) riverside site in central London [Figure 1], is the site for this case study.

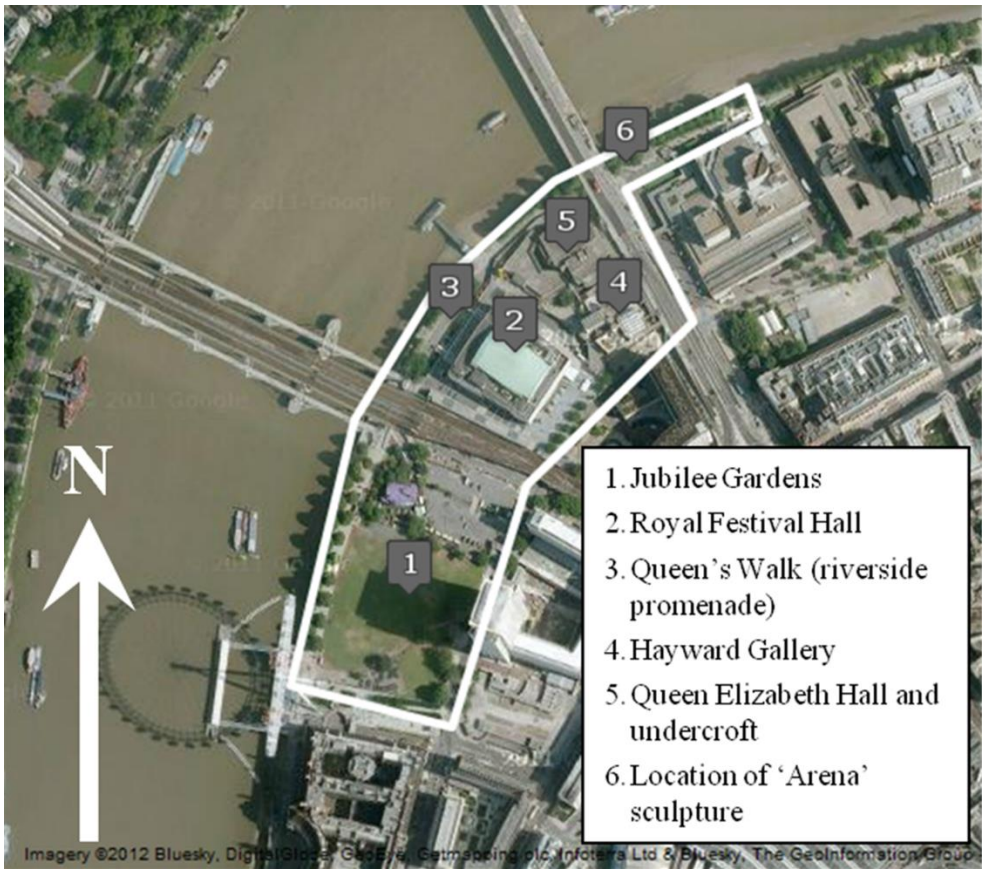

Figure 1 - The 7-hectare Southbank Centre site (bounded in white) with key sites labelled.

Specifically, the case study concerns the 'undercroft' of the Queen Elizabeth Hall, a concert hall at the Southbank Centre. This undercroft is a two-level paved concrete area beneath the concert hall that is accessed at street level and that opens out to a wide riverside promenade to one side but is otherwise covered and enclosed [Figure 2].

Figure 2 - the Queen Elizabeth Hall undercroft with its two levels, sections of banked concrete and opening onto the riverside promenade visible.

Since the mid-1970s, skateboarders (including the author) have taken advantage of the undercroft's morphology (smooth flooring, banked walls, sets of steps, and protection from the elements), its public-ness and its central London location (making it accessible via public transport). Since then, use of the undercroft has expanded to include practitioners of other 'urban sports' (e.g. stunt cycling, inline skating and parkour) and other creative pursuits (e.g. graffiti, photography and film-making). Intriguingly, a decision to leave the undercroft "open for unpredictable and as yet unknown uses" (Borden, 2014, p. 67) was part of the undercroft's design. It was designed, intentionally, as a 'loose space' (Franck & Stevens, 2007).

While the site was designed neither for skateboarding nor the wider inclusion of youth, its loose form meant the site 'afforded', in environmental psychology terms (Gibson, 1979), appropriation by skateboarders and others (Jones, 2013). The Southbank Centre's acceptance of the skateboarders' use of the undercroft varied over time, but in the mid-2000s a relatively constructive relationship between skateboarders and the Centre management developed, aided by sympathetic attitudes among senior Southbank Centre staff (Jones, 2014). Despite these improved relations, users of the undercroft have persistently feared being evicted (Jones, 2014). This outlook seemed validated when, in 2013, the Southbank Centre announced, with a reported lack of consultation (LLSB, 2013a), its 'Festival Wing' plans which would involve redeveloping the undercroft and creating a purpose-built skatepark elsewhere on its estate.

These plans severely underestimated the sense of place attachment skateboarders had to the undercroft and resulted in existing 'Save the Southbank' activists (Jones, 2014) and

other undercroft users establishing the 'Long Live Southbank' (LLSB) campaign for the preservation of the undercroft for skateboarding (Blayney et al., 2014). Through various means (Caines, 2014) LLSB activists secured wide support for their campaign. This included the eventual support of the then Mayor of London, Boris Johnson (Brown, 2014). As a protracted legal battle between LLSB and the Southbank Centre loomed (Emerick, 2017), the two parties came to a binding agreement September 2014 protecting the undercroft from redevelopment and safeguarding its use by skateboarders and others in the long term (LLSB, 2015).

Key Participants:

The key participants include the users of the undercroft and those responsible for managing and redeveloping the Southbank Centre. Most importantly among the latter are: the architects at the then London County Council responsible for designing the 'Festival Wing' complex of buildings of which the undercroft is a part (Borden, 2014); Southbank Centre management and estates staff; 'The Side Effects of Urethane' skater-designer collective; the Greater London Authority and the local authority (Lambeth Council).

As per national trends[1], skateboarders in the undercroft are predominantly youthful and, in line with wider developments, increasingly diverse (Barksdale, 2015; Blayney et al., 2014, pp. 268-277). LLSB was initiated and organized primarily by adult skateboarders who used the undercroft. The campaign involved youth in a number of ways, however. They had a youth spokesperson (15 year-old Reuben Russo [LLSB, 2013b]) and in the course of their campaign they "engaged with hundreds of students from schools, colleges and universities from around the UK and across the world" (LLSB, 2015, p. 36). They also subverted prevailing perceptions of decreasing youth political engagement by adopting the slogan 'politically active young people' as a rallying call. Through these initiatives, and the work of committed volunteers and a highly-effective campaign strategy (Caines, 2014), LLSB successfully "awoke an activist mentality and enlivened people (some as young as seven or eight years old) to become active urban citizens" (Mould, 2015, p. 146).

Funding:

Given this site's complex history, scale, and prominence, the funding mechanism for this case study is not straightforward. The construction and management of the Southbank Centre was publicly funded until 1988 when it became an independent charity. Today, 42% of its funding comes from Arts Council England which receives approximately two-thirds of its own budget from the UK government. The Centre's remaining funding comes from a mix of ticket sales, sponsorships, commercial partnerships, and individual donations. The recently completed Festival Wing Repair and Maintenance Project (of which the undercroft is a part) was primarily made possible through a large Arts Council England capital grant (Southbank Centre, 2017).

The Side Effects of Urethane's installation of pieces of skate-able street furniture in the undercroft was authorized by the Southbank Centre but financially-supported by a variety of high profile youth-oriented brands (including Sony Playstation, Nike and Casio G-shock [Borden, 2015).

LLSB was set up as a non-profit organization and funded through donations from the

[1] In a recent survey by Sport England (2017), while 3% of survey respondents were aged 14-19 over half (50.6%) of the respondents who reported having skateboarded in the last 4 weeks were in that age bracket.

public and money generated through the sale of merchandise designed specifically for the campaign (Butter, 2014).

Methodology/Process:

This case is not typical of design processes, practices, and policies for the creation of youth-inclusive public outdoor environments. Instead, it is the story of a youth-inclusive skate spot that has been iteratively produced through phases of appropriation, contestation, ad-hoc consultation, design intervention and collaboration. It is a story that provides a rich and insightful example for urban authorities grappling with how to manage residual outdoor spaces that have been appropriated by young people.

In this story, various turning points for youth engagement were important. After a period in the 1990s when the Southbank Centre actively sought to exclude skateboarders from the undercroft through physical and regulatory means (Whitter, 2014), improving Centre-user relations were most concretely exemplified through the skater-led, and Southbank Centre-approved, installation of skate-able street furniture in the undercroft [Figure 3] by The Side Effects of Urethane design collective in 2004 and 2006 (Blayney et al., 2014).

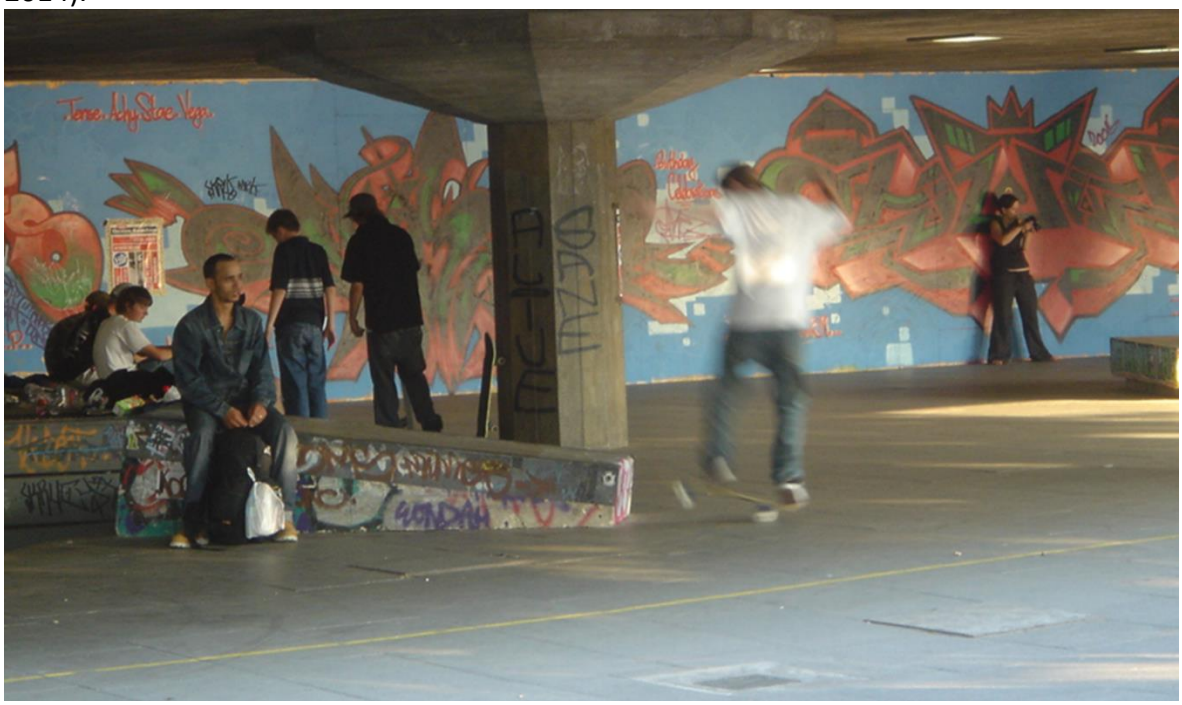

Figure 3 - A 'moving unit' in the undercroft being used, as intended, as a bench and as an obstacle for skateboarding.

Around this time, the Southbank Centre operations manager also decided to conduct ad hoc meetings with undercroft users to discuss what could be done to improve the space (Jones, 2014). These informal meetings supplemented a more formal 'creative vision' consultation event held in October 2006 where local residents, undercroft users, and other stakeholders were invited to provide input into the Centre's ongoing physical and creative transformation.

Partly out of these processes a number of undercroft design interventions were implemented. While some of these were seemingly rather trivial (e.g. providing trash receptacles), they reflected a more attentive attitude towards the young people using the space that ran counter to broader trends of youth exclusion (Woolley, Hazelwood & Simkins, 2011). Other crime prevention interventions were especially significant for young people

given their fear (and experience) of personal crime in the undercroft (Jones, 2014). These changes included renewing lighting in the undercroft and providing security cameras.

This period also heralded ominous changes to the undercroft for skateboarders, however, including the sizeable reduction in the extent of the skate-able undercroft space by the Southbank Centre in 2005 (Blayney et al., 2014). As a result, skateboarders continued to perceive their ongoing use of the space as tentative – a perception validated in 2013 with the Southbank Centre's 'Festival Wing' plans.

Outcomes:

At one level, the outcome of this study is the transformation of a 'skate spot' into a *de facto* skate park – indeed, the undercroft is increasingly referred to as a 'skate park' (e.g. Brown, 2014). The preservation of a place where young people can gather to hang out and socialize should not be overlooked as an important outcome.

Additionally, the process was transformational for those involved. Participation in LLSB gave young people experience of efficacious community organizing. In addition, they learned about citizen participation in formal planning processes. Notably, LLSB campaigners created a 'guide to saving a skate spot' (Woodhead & LLSB, 2016) and have assisted similar campaigns (including internationally, e.g. in Atlanta and Vancouver [Toland, 2018]).

For Southbank Centre management, having to recognize skateboarders' place attachment to the undercroft has precipitated a more cooperative outlook. Crucially, this more reciprocal Southbank Centre-undercroft user relationship has potentially profound implications for the wider inclusion of youth. Thus, LLSB and the Southbank Centre are now working together on a joint crowdfunding campaign to raise £790,000 [~1,000,000 USD] (to be supplemented by a £700,000 [~900,000 USD] grant from the Mayor of London's 'Good Growth Fund'). This funding will be used not only to fully restore the undercroft for skateboarders (and other existing users) but also, critically, to create a 'Young People's Headquarters' there. According to a joint Southbank Centre-LLSB press release, this facility will host "learning and participation events and programs that will welcome hundreds of schoolchildren and local people to creative projects every day" (Southbank Centre & LLSB, 2017, p. 1). A final implication of this case study, therefore, is that the demands of one youth constituency can, through cooperation and with imagination, be harnessed to improve the wider inclusion of youth in the city.

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