

---

Social exclusion has developed as a term to refer to individuals within society who are excluded due to poverty or other economic factors. This paper discusses the fact that of the under-represented user of urban open spaces – women, people from an ethnic minority background, disabled people, older people and younger people – young people, and in particular teenagers are often perceived of as a problem in the urban context. This is particularly the case for skateboarders. In the USA skateboarders are increasingly being banned from city centres which have not been designed or are not managed for them – they are increasingly being expected to skate in purpose built skate parks. This trend has spread to the UK where, particularly in some of the northern towns, skateboarding as an activity is being outlawed. Over a 13 year period skateboarders in the City of Sheffield, in particular, have been moved on from one favourite location to another. Does the skateboard provided for them satisfy their needs and make them feel socially included or not?

Initially the term ‘social exclusion’ was used in France to describe people ‘who had slipped through the social insurance system, with the result that they were being ‘administratively excluded by the state’ (Burchardt, Le Grand and Piachaud, 1999). As the term ‘social exclusion’ was adopted across the European continent during the late 1990’s it was increasingly used to describe people at an economic disadvantage and



these centres have included out of town shopping centres, retail parks, factory shops, catalogue shopping and more recently on-line shopping. Coupled with the congestion that many urban areas face this has resulted in the loss not only of economic prosperity to some city centres,

without the vitality, or people, there would be no viability, or economics. Historically people have used the urban core for markets, fairs, religious events and festivals with activities such as bull fighting, fire eating and acrobatics (Girouard, 1985).

Yet for many years the CBD has been seen and perceived as purely for business and therefore an economic entity with no thought being given to the social role or importance of the area. However there are a few who have tried to develop an understanding of the use and meanings that the CBD hold for ordinary people. Among the most notable was Whyte (1973) who, in America, studied how people use plazas in their town centers, observing that most of the activities are passive ones of watching and chatting. In addition Gehl (1996) is renowned for his work undertaken in Scandinavia where he identified that different types of activities can take place. These are identified as necessary, optional and social activities and it is these which add life and vitality to our urban spaces. These necessary and optional activities increasing lead in to social activities where people encounter each other and have, or make, time to spend with each other.

One other development during the last ten years there has been an attempt to bring vitality back into many town and city centres by developing strategies for the '24 hour city'. In many locations this has been accompanied by a desire to return to having more people living in the city centre and thus an increased availability of residential accommodation.

Young people in particular have been shown to be regular and frequent users of town and

Swanwick and Woolley, 2002 and Woolley, 2003). Such benefits clearly enhance the quality of life of the increasing millions of people who live in urban areas. To realise the full potential of these benefits people need to be able to access and use them when and how they want. Not to be able to use such spaces in a way an individual would like to could be defined as social exclusion, following the argument of Burchardt, Le Grand and Piachaud's (1999) that someone should be geographically resident, want to participate in an activity and be prevented from doing so through no fault of their own.

Under-represented users, socially excluded people, of urban parks and green spaces have been shown to include women, disabled people, people from ethnic minority backgrounds, older people and younger people (Comedia and Demos, 1995 and Dunnett, Swanwick and Woolley, 2002). A limited understanding of the use that some of these under-represented user groups make of urban open spaces has been developing over a period of years. People from ethnic minority backgrounds have been identified as having specific patterns of use of parks in Chicago (Loukaitou-Sideris, 1995) while issues and problems associated with the use of urban open spaces by disabled people have only recently begun to be addressed (Price and Stoneham, 2001, Dunnett, Swanwick and Woolley, 2002 and Woolley, 2002.) Of the under-represented user groups young people, often teenagers, are the ones who are often perceived as 'a problem' by the activities that they might participate in or even purely by their presence in a particular location.

The teenage years are an important, sometimes difficult, period of an individual's emotional and physical development with growing independence from parents. At this age young people seek to establish their self-identity through opinions, values, looks and preferences choosing musical styles, dress codes and leisure activities as the building blocks of a self-identity. This has a direct relationship with their choice of social

in an attempt to discover how they used and valued their environment and identified the importance of urban space as a vital resource in the development from adolescence to adulthood. Hart looked more closely at young peoples' spatial awareness through a study of children in a small American town, and provided rare insights into the intricacy in which the urban environment is woven into the lives of young people. Ward carried out research in Britain to produce a qualitative

“Where the homeless are ejected from business and retail areas by such measures like curved bus benches, window ledge spikes and doorway sprinkler systems, so skaters encounter similar treatment. Managers have added rough textured surfaces to discourage skaters, while more overt measures include spikes and bumps added to handrails, blocks of concrete placed at the foot of banks, chains across ditches and steps, and new, unridable surfaces such as gravel and sand.”(Borden, 1998a)

Los Angeles is one





The Cardiff skateboarders had been moved on from their previous



Millennium Galleries, improvements to the links between the railway station and the city centre and is awaiting the construction of a hotel. The authorities were very concerned that the high quality fabric of the redesigned external spaces might be damaged by skateboarders and so a bye law was introduced to cover the heart of the city project, which includes Tudor Square as well as the Peace Gardens. Thus the skateboarders were again excluded from their favourite natural terrain.

A questionnaire that Sheffield City Council undertook with 200 skateboarders identified that skateboarders in Sheffield are predominantly male and aged between 11 and 22 with more than half of them being school pupils and almost a quarter being students at college or university. Almost one third had been skating for two or more years, with over a third skating for one to two years and a third skating for a year or less. Almost three quarters of the skateboarders participate in their sport three or more times a week with nearly ninety per cent participating twice or more a week (Sheffield City Council and Words and Pictures, 1998).

Yet why Tudor Square was so popular was still an unanswered question by this quantitative work. So qualitative work was undertaken in the summer of 1998 in the form of focus group discussions with skaters of Tudor Square. These semi-structured discussions enabled the interviewees to feel 'strength of numbers' while at the same time allowing the interviewer to study the dynamics of the group (May, 1997). Similar discussions with skateboarders in Manchester and Cardiff city centers were undertaken in the summer of 1999. These discussions revealed four main reasons why Tudor Square and the city centre spaces in Manchester and Cardiff were popular with skateboarders. These four criteria are identified as *accessibility*, *trickability*, *sociability* and *compatibility* (Woolley and Johns, 2001). Accessibility relates to the fact that the chosen skating spot is centrally located, easy to get



surrounding uses of the open space and associated housing and retailing opportunities. This facility has indeed become a focal point for the skateboarders activities within the city centre. (Payne and Spencer, unpublished).

So, as in many other urban locations, the skateboarders of Sheffield have, over a period of more than 13 years repeatedly been excluded from some of their favourite locations in the city centre. This exclusion has not been due to poverty or economic considerations but due to the perception of skateboarders as a nuisance and concern for damage to the urban fabric. However, it does appear from the initial follow up work undertaken by Payne and Spencer that the skate park that has been provided was, initially at least, satisfying some of the needs of the skaters.

It would now be very exciting to follow these previous studies with a study some years into the use of the skate park. A new study could investigate whether the skaters are still happy with the skate park, whether any of them still try or would like to still skate in Tudor Square and

Architectural Space, in - *Occupying Architecture : Between the Architect and the User*, (London, Routledge).

Burchardt, T., Le Grand, J. and Piachaud, D. (1999) Social Exclusion in Britain 1991-1995 *Social Policy and Administration*, 33(3) pp 227-244.

Butler, P. (as accessed on 22/04/98) *Manchester bans skating*, <http://www.skateboard.co.uk/project/>

Childress, H. (1999) *Manchester bans skating*,

November 1997, pp. 8-9.

Price, R. and Stoneham, J. (2001) *Making connections*, The Sensory Trust, Bath  
Sheffield City Council and Words and Pictures. (1998) *Skateboarding, Roller Blading  
and BMX Questionnaire*, (Sheffield, Sheffield City Council). Also available on  
<http://www.wordsandpictures.com>

*Sheffield Star* 9 October 1997, 3 January 1997, 29 May 1998

Social Exclusion web site (2002) [www.socialexclusionunit.gov.uk](http://www.socialexclusionunit.gov.uk) accessed on  
23.9.02

Thompson, J. W (1998) *A Good Thrashing - Skatepark Design*, *Landscape  
Architecture*, March 1998.

Vance, J. E. Jnr. (1966) Focus on Downtown: Community Planning Review. Reprinted  
in Bourne, L (ed) (1971) *Internal Structure of the City: Reading On Space and  
Environment*, (New York, Oxford University Press).

Valentine, G. (1996) Children Should be Seen and not Heard: The Production and  
Transgression of Adults' Public Space, *Urban Geography*, 17 (3), pp. 205-220.

Ward, C. (1978) *The Child in the City*, (London, The Architectural Press).

White, R. (1993) Youth and the Conflict over Urban Space, *Children's Environments*,  
10(1), pp. 85-93.

Whyte, W. (1973) Please Just a Nice Place to Sit in *More Streets for People* (New York,  
Italian Art and Landscape Foundation).

Wilson, J. (1997) Skaters face ban from city centres, *The Guardian*, 6 December 1997.

Worpole, K. (1997) *The Richness of cities: Working paper 2: Nothing to Fear? Trust  
and respect in urban communities*, Comedia and Demos, London.

Worpole, K. and Greenhalgh, L. (1995) *Park Life: urban parks and social renewal*  
Comedia and Demos, London.

Woolley, H (2003) *Urban Open Spaces*, Spon Press, London.

----- (2002) *Accessibility of urban open spaces* – paper presented at Creating  
Sustainable Urban Environments: Future Forms of City Living, Christ Church College,  
Oxford, September 2002.

-----, Gathorne-Hardy, F. and Stringfellow, S. (2001) The Listening Game in  
Jefferson, C. Rowe, J and Berbbia, C. (eds.) *The Sustainable Street*, WIT Press,  
Southampton.

----- and Johns, R. (2001) Skateboarding: the city as playground, *Journal of Urban  
Design* 6(2) pp 211-230.

-----, Spencer, C., Dunn, J. and Rowley, G. (1999a) The Child as Citizen:  
Experiences of British Town and City Centres, *Journal of Urban Design*, 4(3),  
pp. 255-282.

-----, Dunn, J., Spencer, C., Short, T. and Rowley, G. (1999b) Children Describe their  
Experiences of the City Centre: a qualitative study of the fears and concerns which may  
limit their full participation, *Landscape Research*, 24(3), pp. 287-301.

Helen Woolley trained as a Chartered Landscape Architect, Helen is Senior Lecturer in the  
Department of Landscape at the University of Sheffield.