A Good Thrashing

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On downtown streets and plazas and in shopping malls all over North America ordinary kids are being ticketed and fined—and, in some cases, acquiring police records—for nothing more than practicing their kickflips, wallies, and ollie handrails.

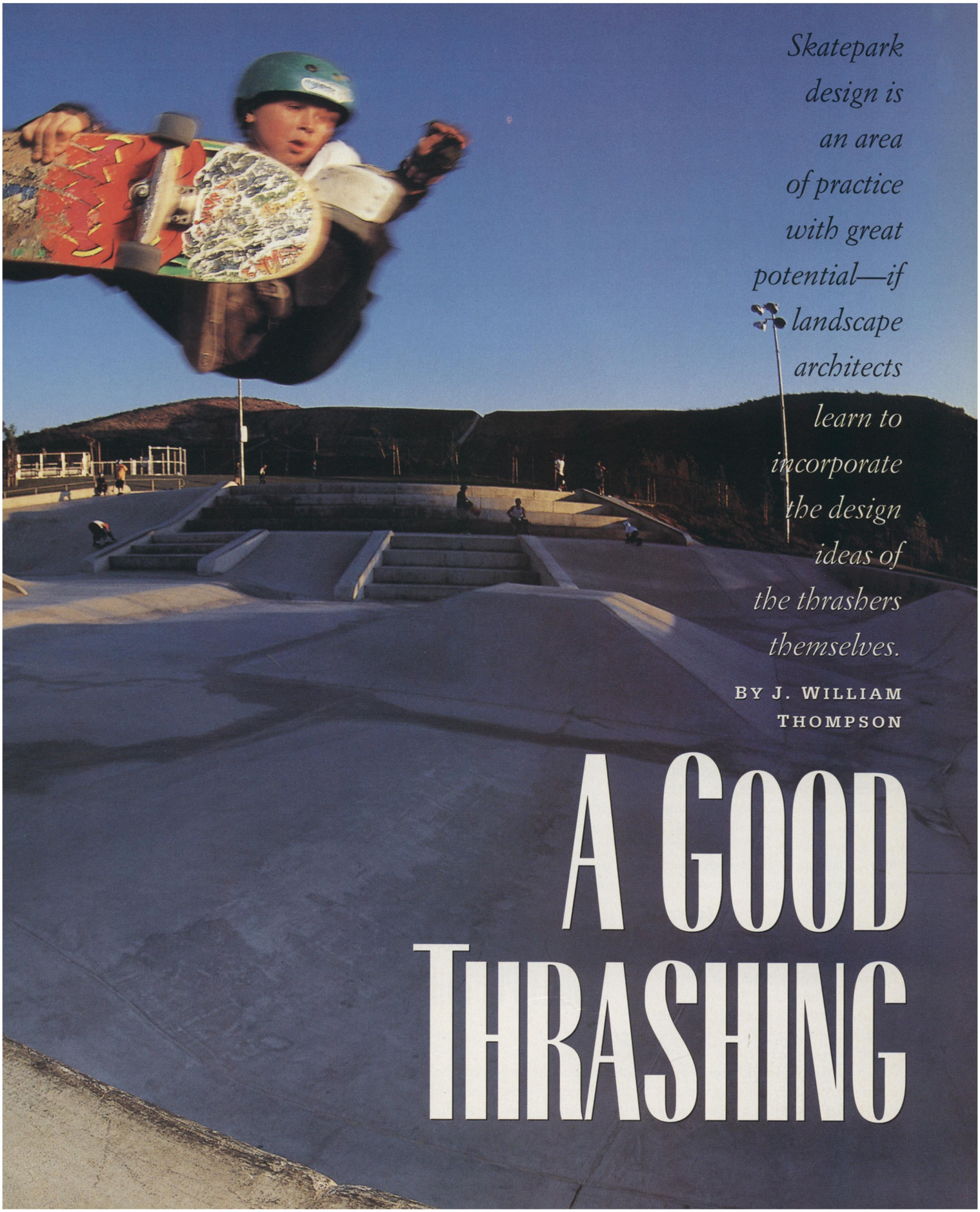
Granted, skateboarders who practice their stunts on city steps, benches, planters, and railings can be holy terrors. Residents of Albuquerque, New Mexico, found this out recently when they unveiled their Downtown Civic Plaza, rebuilt at a cost of $9.8 million. Within a matter of hours skateboarders had descended on the reconstructed plaza, finding its ramps, handrails, and deep steps ideal for practicing their moves. Within two weeks they had left their imprint on the plaza: deep gouges on the edges of the new benches and the new fountain—the result of "grinding," a move in which a skateboarder slides his board's metal axle along a coping or a curb. They had also stripped the paint off of the newly installed handrails and marred the city logo. Among the aggrieved, according to *The Albuquerque Journal,* were construction workers who took umbrage at seeing their renovation work scarred and pitted. "They are just tearing it up," said one. "This is two weeks' damage. Multiply that by three hundred sixty-five days. You won't have much left." Shortly thereafter, the mayor banned skaters from the plaza.

Another contentious site is the San Francisco Embarcadero. There, Justin Herman Plaza, designed by Lawrence Halprin, FASLA, was put to an unintended use when skateboarders found its deep steps ideal for stunts until private security guards began routinely chasing them out. The current magnet for skateboarders is the Promenade Ribbon, the two-mile-long linear art piece designed by Barbara Solomon and Stanley Saitowitz that runs the length of the Embarcadero. "The installation's series of concrete blocks and benches are so perfect for lipside kickflips and wallie five-Os that the project couldn't have been better designed by a skater," noted *The San Francisco Weekly.* But chips and scars in the concrete from skateboarders' skidding and sliding have raised the ire of city supervisors who want to scotch the activity. The city arts commissioner was more pragmatic: She had stainless-steel edging installed along a portion of the Ribbon—to the delight of the skaters, who found that the metal edges made grinding much more exciting. The designers of the Ribbon, for their part, are divided: Solomon exults in the Ribbon's use by skateboarders, whereas Saitowitz views it as a desecration. (See "Walking the Line," *Landscape Architecture,* April 1996.)

San Francisco is tolerant of skateboarders compared to many cities, however. Washington, D.C., tired of skateboarders using the exquisite paving patterns of Freedom Plaza and other nationally

THRASHER JOSH
Ptashne goes airborne above the new skatepark in Temecula, California. Designed by Alan Fishman, ASLA, and skateboarder Kevin Thatcher, this is the largest skatepark in North America.

TIM RUE



Skatepark design is an area of practice with great potential—if landscape architects learn to incorporate the design ideas of the thrashers themselves.

BY J. WILLIAM THOMPSON

A GOOD THRASHING

THE BURNSIDE *Project, built by the skateboarders themselves beneath an interstate highway in Portland, Oregon, has been designated the top-rated skatepark in the United States by* Thrasher *magazine and is an example of siting a skatepark in an otherwise unused space.*

significant sites, has begun cracking down. "Skating in D.C. is now a bust," says skateboard manufacturer Intensity Skates's national directory of skateparks posted on the Internet. "Cops will arrest you and they will ticket you...at any federal building or monument."

Instead of treating skateboarders as common hoodlums, one might ask, why not simply provide legitimate skateparks in the kids' neighborhoods, just as we provide tennis courts, swimming pools, and soccer fields? (Washington, D.C.—typical of most U.S. cities—does not boast a single skatepark.)

Why is there such a dearth of these parks? City governments view skateboarding as an inherently dangerous activity and dread liability claims from injuries sustained on city property. Such issues have in fact plagued the sport's brief forty-year history.

INSTEAD OF TREATING SKATEBOARDERS AS COMMON HOODLUMS, SIMPLY PROVIDE LEGITIMATE SKATEPARKS IN THE KIDS'

The skateboarding boom that followed the 1973 innovation of the urethane wheel, for example, spurred the construction of commercial skateparks nationwide. But most of these early parks—the majority of them built with gunite—were so poorly constructed that they became dangerous and began to suffer insurance and liability problems. At the end of the seventies they began to close en masse; eighty percent of them were bulldozed in 1979 alone. Many cities, concerned with safety and liability issues, even banned backyard skate ramps. At the same time, many jurisdictions toughened ordinances against skating in plazas and on sidewalks. Left with nowhere to go, many skateboarders simply quit. Others refused to turn in their boards and continued to skate on the street—one step ahead of the police, confirming skateboarding as a rebel, underground sport with a hard-core cult image and skateboarders as a public nuisance or, at best, children run amok.

Skateboarding technique also evolved in those years on the street. The sport had been pioneered in the 1950s by surfers, and the early skateparks reflected surfers' interest in flowing, wavelike forms: skate runs, bowls, and mounds. Exploration of the possibilities of the street in the 1980s produced the aerial maneuvers, gymnastics, and hair-raising stunts—sliding down handrails and jumping down flights of steps, for example—that addicted skateboarders to such specific furnishings as planters, benches, curbs, and railings. This would have important implications for skatepark design: The parks with wavelike, free-flowing curves have come to be labeled "old-school"; the newer, more angular

LUKE OGDEN/THRASHER, BOTH

parks that replicate the elements of the street, "new-school."

Today skatepark construction seems to be rebounding, partly in response to the sport's irrepressible popularity: With 6.2 million participants, skateboarding is the sixth-most-popular sport in the country. Both parents and police are advocating safe facilities where the skateboarders can be monitored, in contrast to the dangers of the street. More important, perhaps, recent legislation protects communities from claims resulting from skateboarding injuries: In California, for example, skateboarding has been declared a hazardous activity, like rock climbing or surfing, so that cities and counties cannot be sued for injuries in skateboard parks by anyone fourteen or older.

One area where skatepark construction is booming is the Denver, Colorado, metropolitan region. Harold Johnson, ASLA, a landscape architect with the community of Arvada, near Denver, recalls that before he designed the skatepark that Arvada built in 1995, only Boulder and Golden, Colorado, boasted skateparks. Today Johnson knows of four parks that are under construction, with more in the planning phase in communities around Denver. Even so, skateparks are not being built fast enough to meet the demand, Johnson says: "Skateboarding is growing like crazy; we can't build skateparks fast enough. There's a ton of kids out there who need facilities"—both from pent-up demand and the continuing growth of the sport. The dearth of parks in Colorado outside of the Denver area is attested to, says Johnson, by the parents who will drive a hundred miles so that their youngsters may skate in Arvada. And the fact that families planning vacations will call from out of state and ask where the Arvada park is located testifies, says Johnson, to the dearth of skateparks around the country. "If a kid has to go out of state looking for a playground—and that's all these skateparks really are—it's pretty sad," he says.

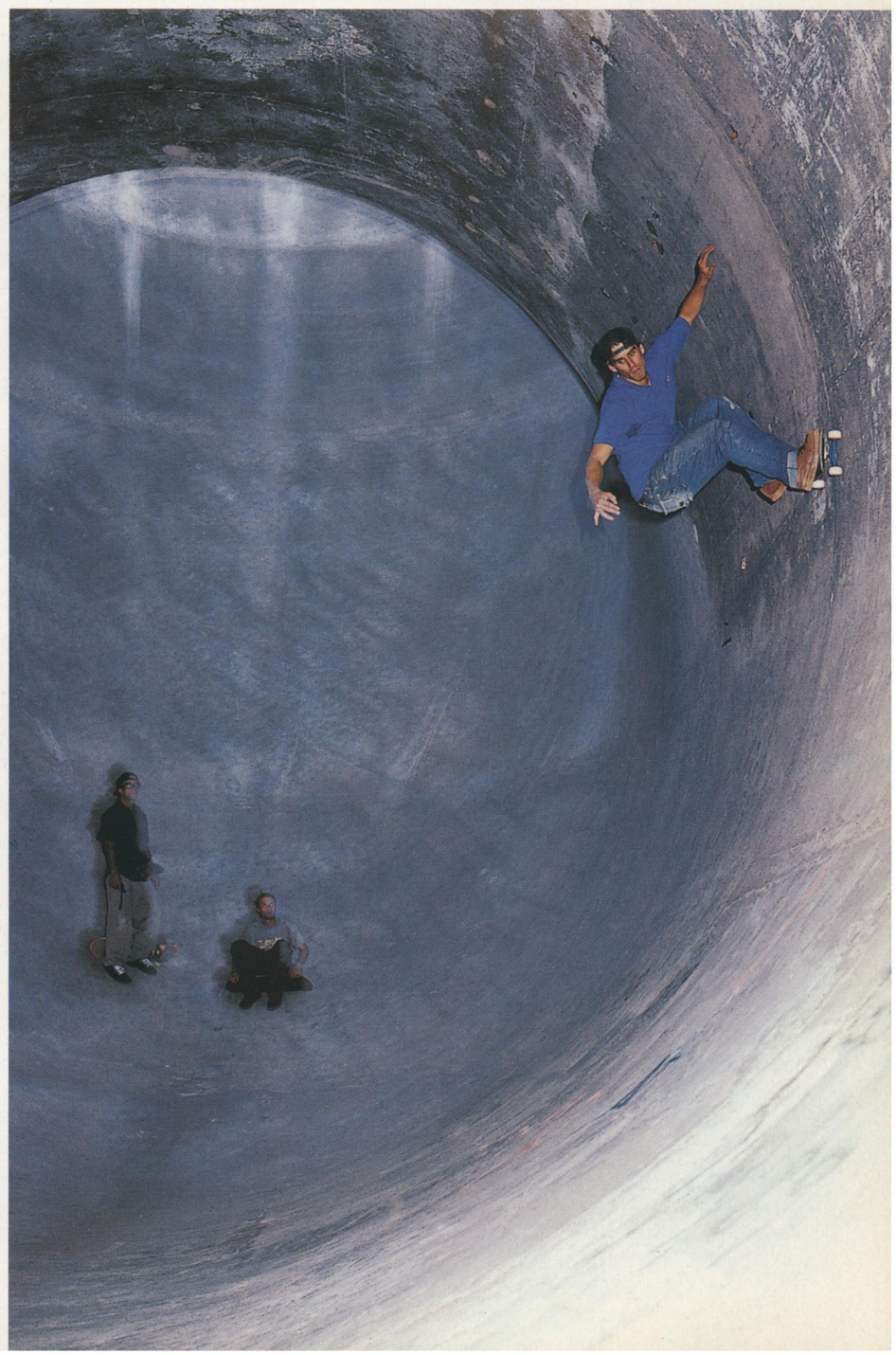
"Sad" is perhaps the descriptive word for all of those states—Missouri, Montana, Kentucky, and New Hampshire among them—that can claim not a single skatepark, according to Intensity Skates's national directory. Most surprising of all is the dearth of skateparks in the sunbelt states where skating could be enjoyed year-round: Arizona recently built one skatepark in Phoenix, but that is the only one in the entire state. New Mexico still does not have a single public facility, and populous sunbelt cities like Orlando, Florida, still lack skateparks.

WHY NOT NEIGHBORHOODS?

But if cities refuse to build skateparks because they view skateboarding as an inherently dangerous activity and dread the prospect of injury claims, the evidence is that both of these notions are largely unfounded. According to the Consumer Products Safety Commission, skateboarding has a smaller percentage of reported injuries per participant (.49%) than soccer (.93%), baseball (2.25%), and basketball (1.49%). Granted, many skateboarding accidents are simply not reported—but this speaks well of skateboarders, who apparently feel that safety is their responsibility, as are injuries when they happen.

What is certain is that successful claims against cities for public skateparks are virtually nonexistent. In *The S. Park Revolution,* a documentary video that

"NATURAL TERRAIN" *is Kevin Thatcher's term for sites that while not intended for skateboarding lend themselves to the sport—like this spillway for a dam in Texas built by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, "the greatest builders of skateboard terrain," according to Thatcher.*



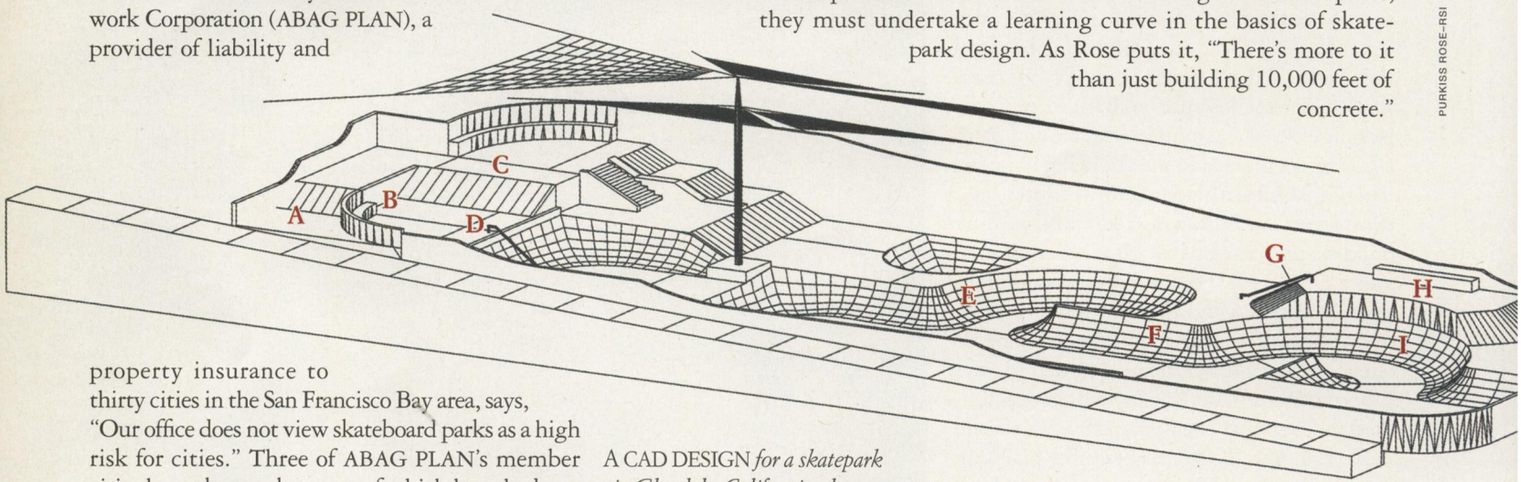
IF LANDSCAPE ARCHITECTS ARE TO BE SUCCESSFUL DESIGNERS OF SUCH PARKS, THEY MUST UNDERTAKE A LEARNING CURVE IN THE BASICS OF SKATEPARK DESIGN.

might serve as a basic primer of liability, design, and other skatepark issues (see the "Resources" list at the end of this article), one city recreation official after another in Colorado, Oregon, Nevada, California, Maryland, and other states makes virtually the same statement: that there has never been a single claim against free public facilities in their cities, even for skateparks that have been operating for several years. Furthermore, according to skatepark advocate and ramp designer Tim Payne, who coproduced *The S. Park Revolution,* there has never been a case in the United States of anyone's being awarded a claim for a skateboarding injury.

Even some insurance providers have now begun to advocate skateparks. Albert Fierro, the president of the Bay Area Governments Pooled Liability Assured Network Corporation (ABAG PLAN), a provider of liability and property insurance to thirty cities in the San Francisco Bay area, says, "Our office does not view skateboard parks as a high risk for cities." Three of ABAG PLAN's member cities have skateparks, none of which have had any skateboarding claims since the insurance program was initiated in 1986. Fierro has a few suggestions that may help communities avoid liability claims: These include opening the park only to "free play" without supervision (ironically, supervision increases liability) and posting abundant signage noting the hours of operation and requiring the use of safety equipment. Most communities post "Skate at Your Own Risk" signs; some, like Ocean City, Maryland, require skaters to sign a liability waiver before skating.

As municipalities around the country learn how to limit their liability, more and more of them are beginning to view skateparks as a reasonable component of their recreation services—and landscape architects are finding more and more opportunities for designing such parks. The late Ken Wormhoudt worked out of his Santa Cruz, California, office to design in that city, in 1978, the first public skatepark in the country. By the time he died last August at the age of sixty-seven he had designed a total of twelve skateboard facilities currently in use in California, Nevada, Oregon, Washington, and Alaska. The office, which he passed on to his son Zachary, a recent graduate in landscape architecture from Cal Poly San Luis Obispo, is currently working on the designs of twenty-one other skateparks. Steve Rose, ASLA, whose firm, Purkiss Rose-RSI in Fullerton, California, has designed popular skateparks in Huntington Beach, California, and Kent and Des Moines, Washington, says that he has four more under construction and thirty more on the boards. Finally, the largest skatepark in North America—a full acre of concrete—was built last year in Temecula, California,to the design of Alan Fishman, ASLA, in consultation with veteran skateboarder Kevin Thatcher, the publisher of *Thrasher* magazine.

But if the opportunity is there, the process of designing a skatepark is far more complex than one might imagine. If landscape architects are to be successful designers of such parks, they must undertake a learning curve in the basics of skatepark design. As Rose puts it, "There's more to it than just building 10,000 feet of concrete."

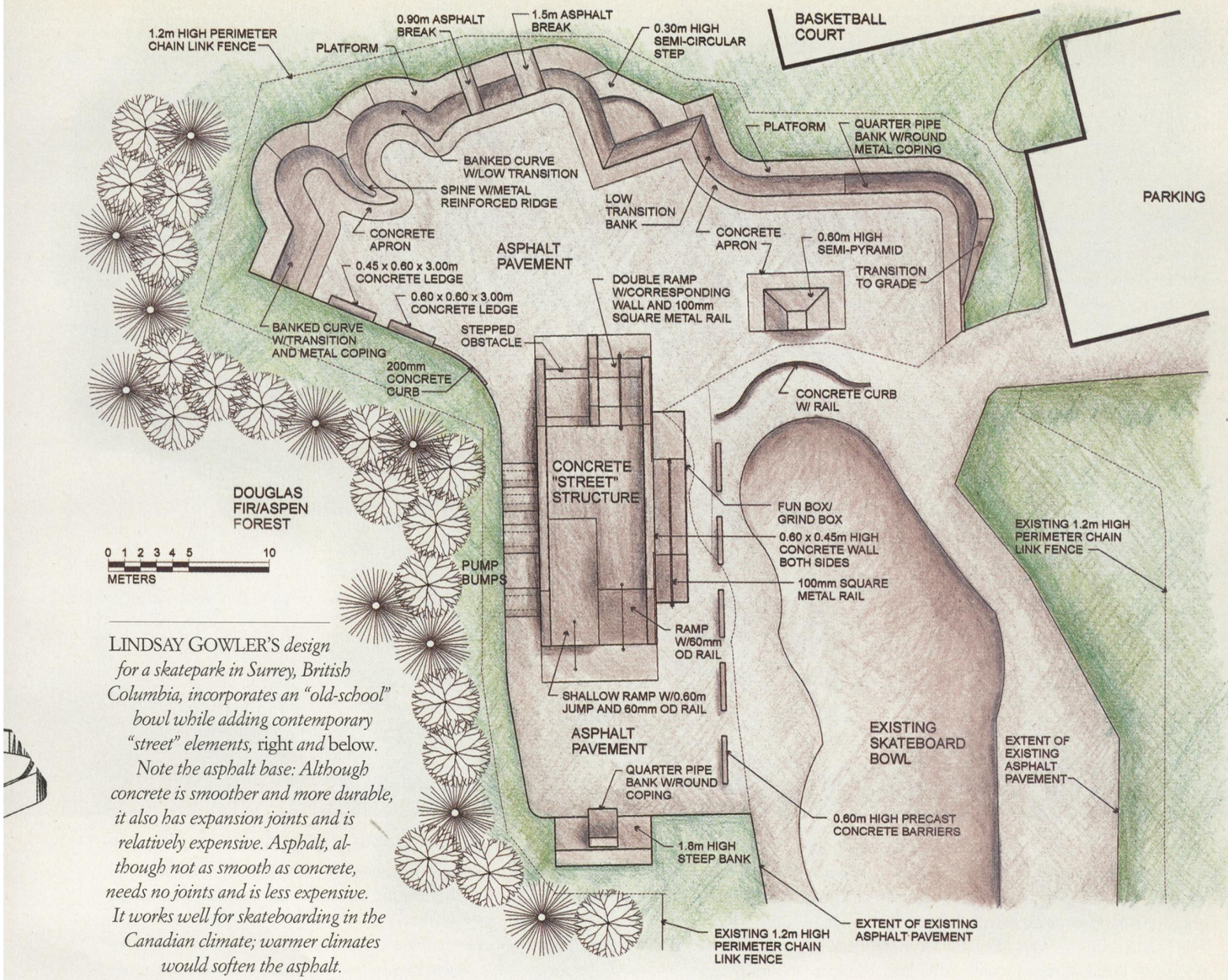


PURKISS ROSE-RSI

A CAD DESIGN *for a skatepark in Glendale, California, shows how a contemporary skatepark integrates "street" elements with freestyle "snakes" and elements that include (A) the park entry, (B) a bench with a steel edge for grinding, (C) a drop-in, (D) a railing, (E) transition ramps, (F) a hip, (G) a kinked, sloped rail, (H) a bench for grinding, and (I) a wall ride. The angular elements permit gymnastics while the fabric cover provides protection from inclement weather.*

If skateboarders had their way, they would design skateparks themselves. To a landscape architect, this may seem a childish notion—after all, skateboarders know nothing of the construction documents and specifications required to get a project built in the public sector. But the skateboarders' wish is rooted in a simple truth: They know what kind of facility they want to skate on. Landscape architects—unless they also happen to be skateboarders—do not.

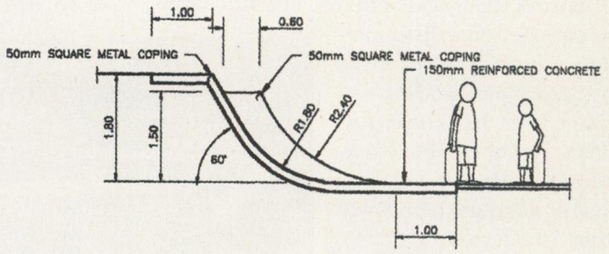
As a result, skateboarders have not always brimmed with gratitude at the skateparks that landscape architects have designed for them. Last September *Thrasher* blasted "the so-called 'landscape architects' who design bogus parks, get paid, and never skate them," adding that "many communities set out with the noble goal of providing a good place for kids to skate only to discover that greedy so-called 'skatepark designers' took most of the funds in fees and proceeded to design facilities that are virtually unskateable." The article cites no specific facilities and probably should not be taken as a blanket condemnation of all landscape architects who design skateparks—but it should serve as a warning

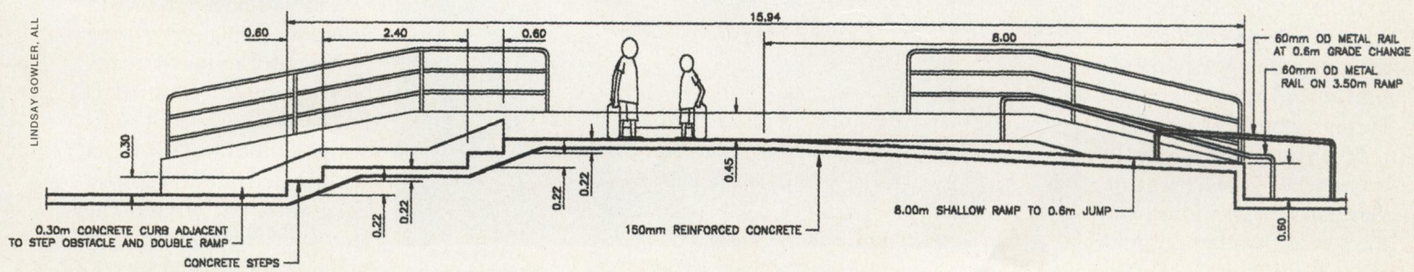


LINDSAY GOWLER'S *design for a skatepark in Surrey, British Columbia, incorporates an "old-school" bowl while adding contemporary "street" elements,* right *and* below. *Note the asphalt base: Although concrete is smoother and more durable, it also has expansion joints and is relatively expensive. Asphalt, although not as smooth as concrete, needs no joints and is less expensive. It works well for skateboarding in the Canadian climate; warmer climates would soften the asphalt.*

that skateparks are not as straightforward a design problem as tennis and basketball courts.

First, the landscape architect will not find comprehensive skatepark dimensions in *Timesaver Standards* or any other desk reference; the sport is simply too new, and skateparks too few, to have generated design standards. Like a golf course, each skatepark is a unique design tailored to the needs (and the budget) of a community's skateboarders. Moreover, the configuration of a skatepark





demands many technical nuances of which most designers are unaware because "the designers don't understand the users. Skateboarding is something that most landscape architects [as nonskateboarders] can't relate to," says Michael McIntyre, ASLA. McIntyre is one of the few who can relate: He grew up in the sport, competed on the amateur circuit in the early 1980s, and built the Page Mill Ramp, the top-rated ramp in California, in his Los Altos Hills backyard. Now a landscape architect with the Tempe, Arizona, office of Design Workshop, he is currently designing a public skatepark near downtown Albuquerque (that city, to its credit, decided to construct a legitimate facility after declaring its civic plaza off limits) and another for the Phoenix suburb of Chandler.

McIntyre and virtually every other knowledgeable skatepark designer insist that there is one absolute requirement for designing to meet the needs of each skateboarding community: Involve the kids. In fact, this might be stated as the first commandment of skatepark design:

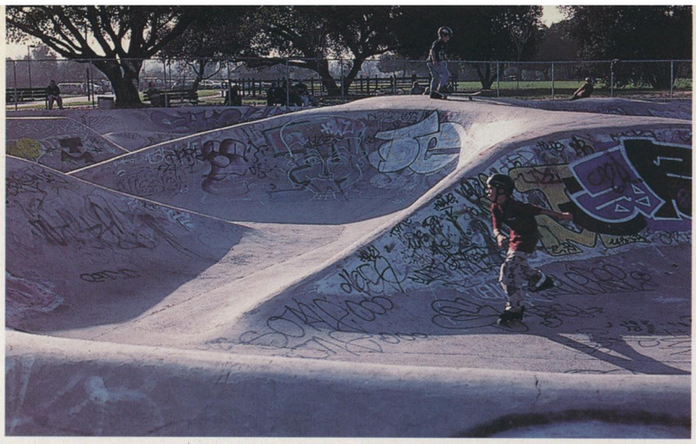
Involve the users as early as possible and throughout the design process. To the greatest extent possible, incorporate their suggestions to the letter.

Rose, who follows this approach, says, "It's deceptive to say that we design skateparks because the users have such a heavy involvement." Johnson is more blunt: Involving skateboarders, he says, is "an absolutely crucial requirement for any designer—or don't get into this."

Ken Wormhoudt evolved a technique (being perpetuated by his son) of letting the skateboarders mold clay models that he used as the basis of his design. Lindsay Gowler, a landscape architect in British Columbia, encourages the users to draw the features they

THE SKATEPARKS *in Palo Alto, California,* shown here, *and Santa Rosa,* opposite, *were designed by the late Ken Wormhoudt and represent the "old-school" skatepark designs distinguished by wavelike, flowing curves. More recent parks by his son, Zachary, include "street" elements.*

MICHAEL PERALTA, ALL



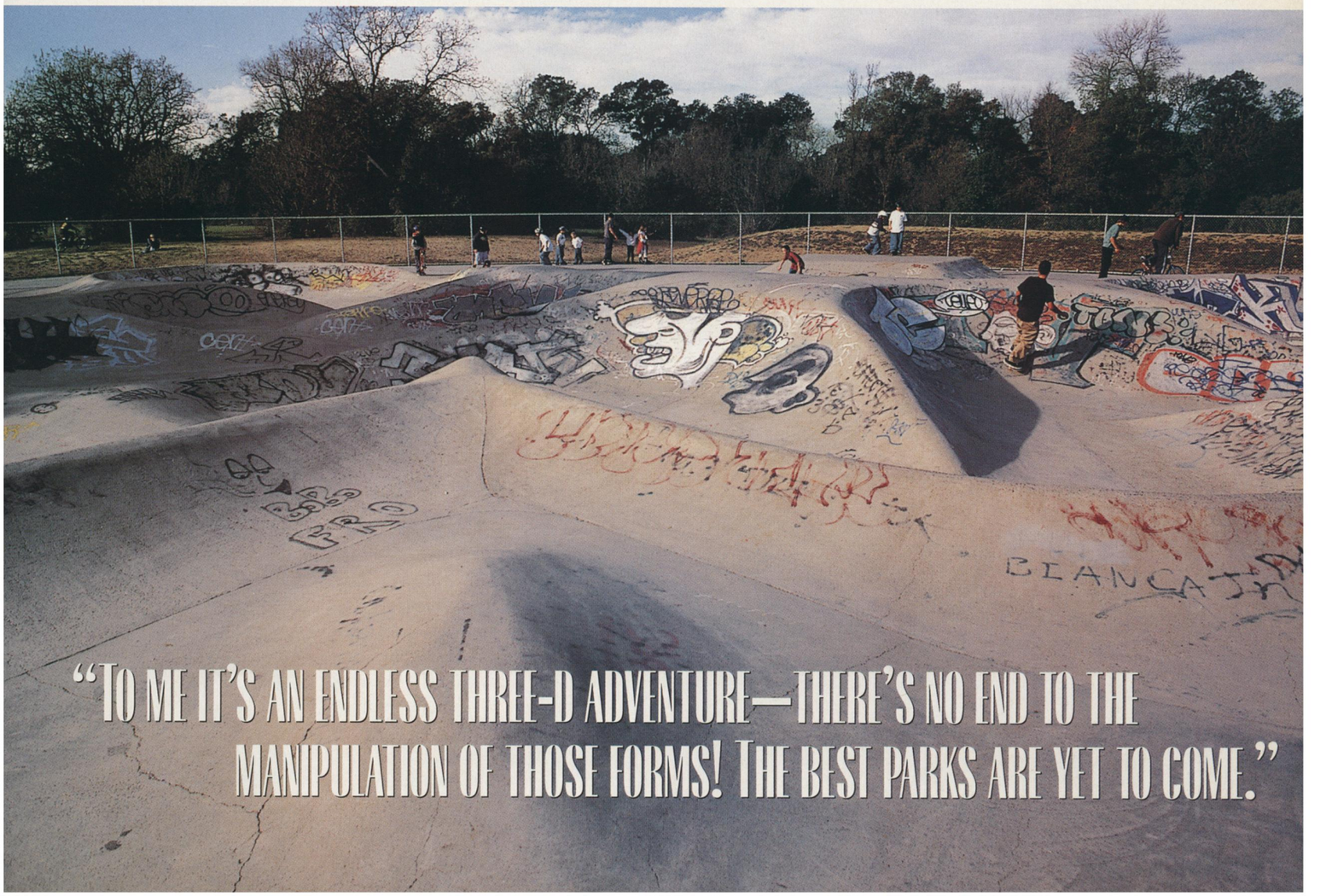
GRAFITTI *are common phenomena in skateparks, except in cities that actively prohibit tagging. "I personally think it looks great to see all the color," says Zachary Wormhoudt.*

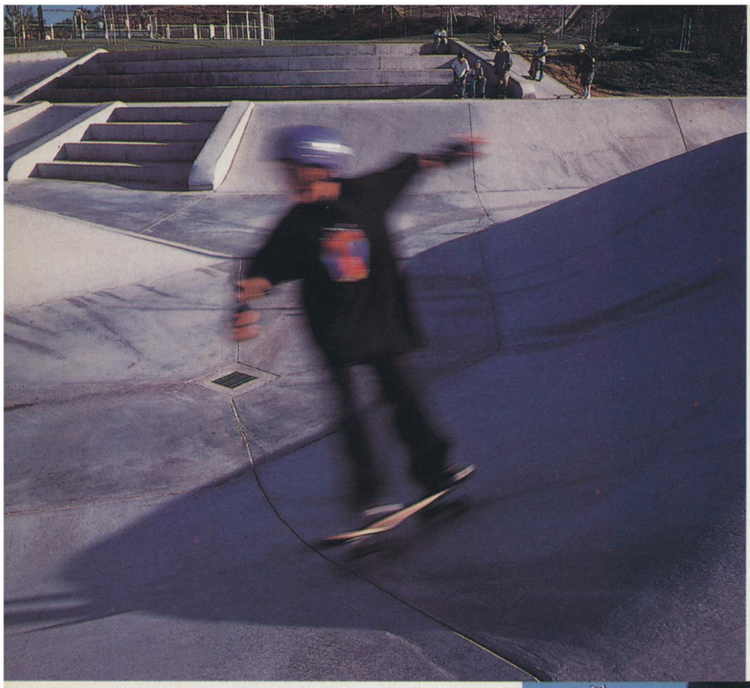
want as accurately as possible. The resulting "idea" sketches are remarkably legible and detailed and were very helpful to Gowler in developing his construction drawings for a park that has just been built in Surrey, British Columbia.

Involving the users in the design process is a familiar approach to most landscape architects, but skatepark design seems to push user involvement to the point at which the users are actually dictating the form of the project. "You really have to listen hard to what the kids want, and that can be hard for a landscape architect," says Deane Lawrence, a landscape architect in Redmond, Washington, who found out the hard way that the kids really knew what they wanted. When designing his first skatepark he dutifully listened to them, then went back to his drawing board and put his own design spin on it. When he took his drawings to the next city council meeting, however, he found twenty-five kids waiting for him. "I got nailed," he remembers. "I walked into a hornets' nest." The kids, he found out, were very vocal—and very emphatic—about getting exactly what they had asked for. Lawrence learned quickly: He went back to the drawing board and modified his drawings, and the skatepark has since been built in downtown Redmond. Today skateparks are the backbone of Lawrence's practice, but he still remembers that first encounter. "It's a humbling experience to build a skatepark," he admits.

If users' ideas are incorporated this rigorously, is there still room for the landscape architect's creativity? Absolutely, says McIntyre. "I can't think of another facility that has such arcs, steps, transitions, and other elements that provide opportunities for sculptural beauty—a lot more opportunity than tennis or handball courts, for sure." In fact, McIntyre believes that the landscape architect's role is to transform the skateboarders' technical requirements into sculptural effects while integrating the skatepark as an element in a park master plan.

But what of skateboarder's infatuation with the mundane elements of the street: boring steps, railings, and curbs? It is difficult to imagine how such elements could be used creatively, but Fishman believes they can be. "I see us [landscape architects] taking street elements to





landscape architect can bring to skatepark design, Gowler says that a knowledge of the properties of concrete is most important, since this is the preferred material for skateparks. But knowing how to design with concrete is only a beginning in understanding the technicalities of skatepark design. Lawrence believes that aspiring designers should seek this understanding in a very direct way: They should learn to skate.

"I think anybody who designs skateparks really does have to skate well enough to know what the kids are talking about." Lawrence, following his own advice, has spent the last year and a half learning to skate—no mean feat in his case: Lawrence is fifty-seven. He uses inline skates rather than a skateboard (most facilities will accommodate both modes).

another level of refinement," he says. "To me it's an endless three-D adventure—there's no end to the manipulation of those forms! The best parks are yet to come."

Obviously, the landscape architect must also bring to the table a technical competency in the design of skatepark elements; the kids can tell the designer what they want but not how to build it. "The skateboarders have a really good idea of what they want from looking at skateboarding magazines," says Gowler. "My role is to take their rough ideas and evolve a design that can be built. They need someone at the level of a registered landscape architect to draw up the proper construction documents." Of all the skills a

TEMECULA'S SKATEPARK *incorporates features for beginners, at* top, *and those adepts like James Holmes, at* right. Above, *a thrasher grinds on steps copied from Lawrence Halprin's steps at the Embarcadero. At* left, *a skateboarder goes airborne off a pyramid.*

"The first word I think of is 'painful,'" he says of the learning process. "You take some serious spills. The one I took off a six-foot ramp made a believer out of me." However painful, Lawrence apparently feels such training was necessary. "To get on top of the curve [of skatepark design] you have to immerse yourself," he says.

Aspiring designers must also familiarize themselves *(Continued on Page 100)*

TIM RUE, ALL

A Good Thrashing

(Continued from Page 86) with the physical elements on which skateboarders elect to skate. They should not, however, limit themselves to visiting existing skateparks. In fact, simply copying existing facilities can be a recipe for a mediocre, outdated design, as many skateparks have failed to incorporate such contemporary features as blocks, handrails, curbs, and steps. With this in mind Thatcher, McIntyre, and others formulate the second commandment of skatepark design thus:

When searching for design ideas, don't assume that existing skateparks will give you the answers. Begin by studying the places where the kids are skating: plazas, streets, swimming pools, and drainage ditches.

The venues cited above constitute what Thatcher terms "natural terrain"—paved areas that because of their configuration are ideal for skateboarding, although not designed as such. *Thrasher* is full of images of such sites, as are the skateboarding videos available at your local skateboard shop. A contemporary approach is to incorporate elements of favorite skateboarding sites into skateparks: Fishman and Thatcher replicated the steps of Halprin's Justin Herman Plaza at Temecula, and Thatcher helped McIntyre carefully measure Halprin's steps, as well as the Promenade Ribbon, to be replicated in McIntyre's projects in the Southwest.

Thatcher has even proposed that cities simply cordon off areas that skaters have adopted and dub them "skateparks." He admits that this idea has little chance of success—can you imagine Freedom Plaza or the Embarcadero being designated skateparks? Nevertheless, Thatcher insists that skateboarding should be integrated into the fabric of the city. "Don't put us in the boondocks—some fallow field or waste dump," he says. "We want to be in the action."

Mention of site selection brings us to the third commandment of skatepark design:

Site skateparks in centralized places where they are highly visible and accessible.

"Site selection is the hardest and the most important thing that we as skatepark designers do," says Rose. This is because, in part, the siting of skateparks must balance several requirements. Skateparks must be accessible—on bus or rapid-rail lines (remember that many skateboarders are too young to drive). Ideally, they should be near other recreational facilities—certainly near telephones in case of accidents. Visibility from the street is important so that parents and others can easily monitor the skateboarders. Ideally, McIntyre believes, a skatepark should be masterplanned as a component of a park and, in fact, the park's focal point, complete with an amphitheater or other seating.

Skateparks should be sited on land that is unsuitable for any other use, according to *The S. Park Revolution.* This guideline is a double-edged sword, however. On the one hand, it has certainly worked in Portland, Oregon, where skaters themselves constructed The Burnside Project—the top-rated skatepark in the county, according to *Thrasher*—beneath an interstate highway interchange. On the other hand, too many skateparks have been relegated to leftover, unattractive, hard-to-reach sites. Old parking lots and defunct basketball courts are commonly foisted on skateboarders and, most advocates agree, are bad choices.

Simply copying existing facilities can be a recipe for a mediocre, outdated design, as many skateparks have failed to incorporate such contemporary features as blocks, handrails, curbs, and steps.

Other important criteria include the size of the skatepark. *The S. Park Revolution* recommends a minimum of 10,000 square feet; but some designers consider even this dangerously small. Remember that most facilities already suffer from overuse: Gowler notes that a small skatepark he designed in British Columbia "is basically at capacity twenty-four hours every day. Between four and eight A.M. there might be a slow period."

Obviously, the above criteria are only a beginning; where does an aspiring designer go for further information? Most encouraging, perhaps, is that some cities that have built skateparks will share the documentation of the project with interested parties (see "Resources"). Even with the best information available, however, it will be up to the landscape architect to work with the users to design the most contemporary skateparks possible: safe, skateable facilities that lure the kids away from the perils of the street. In this regard it is well to keep in mind a statement by veteran skateboarder Thatcher: "If you don't give us a place, we'll find it anyway." **LA**

Resources

"City-Run Skateparks Are Not a Recipe for Disaster" by Matt Rankin. *Parks & Recreation,* July 1997.

Albert Fierro, ABAG PLAN, (510) 464-4900.

"How to Build a Skatepark" by Jake Phelps and Kevin Thatcher. *Thrasher,* September 1997. This four-page article includes some basic design standards and a prototype design by Alan Fishman, ASLA. It is available free upon request from High Speed Productions, 1303 Underwood Avenue, San Francisco, California. (415) 822-3083; FAX (415) 822-8359.

Deane Lawrence: (*dslawrence@juno.com*).

Michael McIntyre: (*skater@designworkshop.com*).

Tim Payne, ramp designer and skatepark advocate: (407) 695-8215 or E-mail: (*cpain123@aol.com*).

The S. Park Revolution by Tim Payne and Morgan Stone. Groove Productions, 1996. This video introduces the viewer to liability, design, and other issues related to building a skatepark. Available for $7.00 from S. Park Video, P.O. Box 1217, Grand Rapids, Minnesota 55744-1217.

Intensity Skates's national directory of existing skateparks: (*http://www.intensity.com//parks.html*).

Alt. Culture's "Skate Talk," an Internet home page, includes a brief history of skateboarding together with video footage of star skateboarders at (*http://www.skatetalk. com/index.html*).

Representative Skateboard Parks of the Lower Mainland by Lindsay Gowler (self-published). This brief study of nine skateparks in British Columbia contains photographs of design details and some design criteria. Available for $39.50 (Canadian) from (*lindsay@axionet. com*) or (604) 980-9070; FAX (604) 980-9605.

"Skateboarding at the Pacific Rim" by Kevin Thatcher. *California Coast & Ocean,* Autumn 1996.

City contacts: A list of those cities that may be willing to send out an information packet on their planning process may be obtained from (*bthompson@asla.org*) or (*cpain123@aol.com*).

Wormhoudt Landscape Architecture: (408) 426-8424; FAX (408) 426-0894.