

Foreword

For such an apparently simple operation – one piece of wood, two basic trucks, four wheels and a balancing rider – skateboarding can be a surprisingly complex phenomenon, involving all manner of actions, attitudes, philosophies, purposes, procedures and technologies. And it can affect all those who come within its orbit, from those who skate to those who work with skaters, community groups, manufacturers, media types and so on. Sophie Friedel’s perceptive and timely study provides a unique insight into one part of this complex realm – that of peace work, and skateboarding’s potential role within it.

On the one hand, this is an exploration into the internal world of skateboarding, and one of the great virtues of this publication is the exploration of “the bodily sensation of feeling at peace” which is here labelled as the “Art of Living Sideways”. Through “ecstatic moments of bliss” we understand skateboarding as offering a kind of inner peace to those who ride. This is far more than just a momentary condition, and Friedel also takes us into a more profound understanding of the body, mind and soul as one performative entity. The sheer joy of skateboarding can then be seen as an embodied practice of what is termed “Transrational Peace Philosophy”, or, simply “the humble act of living the experience and making art as life happen”.

Even more importantly, skateboarding can have effects outside of its own procedures, offering as Friedel notes “unlimited potentials”. Here then we are into the world external to skateboarding, and which other observers of the skate scene have explored in relation to art, graphic design, photography, film, historic preservation and myriad other territories. But, until this book, no one has done this for peace work, and here is another of Friedel’s welcome contributions.

Friedel’s extensive involvement with Skateistan is clearly key, and, for example, we learn much from her observations about the young students there (many of them female). “I could on several occasions,” writes Friedel, “observe how their body energy increased and their self-worth grew when a new trick, no matter how simple or apparently senseless, was learned; this was most visible in their eyes.”

Yet this is far from being a hagiographic account of life at Skateistan. Indeed, a good deal of this book is directed at Friedel herself, showing how skateboarding can be a transformative journey for all of those who come encounter it,

while also being highly reflective of peace studies in relation to western imperialism, theory and practice, and the personal. Particularly robust is the critique of the kind of prescriptive conflict transformation which aims to pass on new knowledge and techniques, in comparison to Friedel's preferred elicitive approach to peace work, which posits the trainer as "a facilitator or even catalyst of the knowledge and techniques that are already within the conflicting parties." As she concludes, this is a move away from peace work done by builders, charity-workers, doctors and engineers and more towards "a work that unfolds the extraordinary human potential inherent in all of us."

Above all, then, Friedel shows that skateboarding's "art of living sideways" is also an art of moving forwards, both physically in space as well as socially in our contemporary society. No one will ever pretend that skateboarding holds immediate answers to contemporary ills and iniquities – as Friedel notes, the world is "too complex to produce pre-fabricated solutions that can solve conflicts" while skateboarding and sport "can only bring change to relational encounters between conflicting groups" – but it can offer a distinctive contribution to aiding in both internal and external peace. This book shows us how that might be.

Iain Borden

The Art of Living Sideways
Skateboarding, Peace and Elicitive Conflict
Transformation

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