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Urban Skater as City Shaper

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about the public’s preferences for or preconceived notions about urban nature? Although the findings of the study are limited to a relatively small number of firms, both the analytical methods used and the results may be applicable to the work of other firms in order to contribute to a larger body of knowledge about approaches to urban nature.

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Studies on urban adolescents (youth) and the design of the built environment often begin with a problem-based approach that attempts to resolve an adult-perceived conflict between youth in general and the greater good of society (Kelly 2003; Rogers and Coaffee 2005). Programming constraints and concerns over safety in the practice of landscape architecture have consequently led to an over-reliance on structured, programmed places (De Visscher and Bouverne-De Bie 2008; Howell 2008). Structured places for youth are inherently embedded in dominant perceptions of “youth” and the desire for youth-places to serve as containers of appropriate youth spatial practice (Howell 2008; Valentine 2003). This critique of how urban designers represent youth environments has been revealed in the work of several recent scholars who have asked why youth choose to skate in cities as opposed to skate parks (Nemeth 2006; Vivoni 2009; Nolan 2003; Kaysen 2004). The repeated answer “because it is more natural” carries a unique perception of the city and an important message for a conference on “urban nature”. The skaters’ unique interpretation of urban environments identifies potential opportunities to diversify urban life. Traditional landscape architectural site analysis, an urban audit following Kevin Lynch (Stevens 2006), and unobtrusive, observation (de Vos 2005) of youth are the methods used to situate adolescent activity. For this presentation, the author will discuss preliminary results from a multi-sited examination of urban, public open spaces around New Orleans—a city known for historic neglect of non-touristy, public places and recent deployment of contemporary urban design strategies following Hurricane Katrina. This study is unique by identifying the specific physical site conditions, placing those conditions in a larger urban context, and unobtrusively observing youth play behavior to account for variations in physical space and youth play. By examining how skaters interpret an urban location, this research addresses how definitions of successful urban form may be challenged to include a heretofore unconsidered population in the design/planning process. The goal is to contribute to a growing body of literature on the benefits of unstructured activity for urban youth. How urban youth continue to be marginalized and how the city can be better designed to address this population is one of the most pressing issues facing an increasingly urbanized society. The presentation will focus on the concept of urban nature as embodied in how adolescents use public, urban, open spaces in the city.