

2003

The Vandal

When in the middle of the 1970's skateboarding emerged, it seemed to be a short lived American trend. Ten years later however, it became an intrinsic part of our urban street culture. And when the strain on public spaces became too great, a breed of large and small skate parks appeared. One of the most eye-catching is situated on the Westzeedijk in Rotterdam.

Together with advertising and graffiti, skateboarding has made the city into a mass medium. Architecture is no longer autonomous and every building and architectural element has become a carrier for information, images and a means for adventure. Buildings are not only suited for hanging neon signs, logos and electronic displays, but also for writing on and covering with flyers and stickers. Further more, one can climb on buildings and bridges, as often proved by the notorious Rotterdammer, Jan van der Meulen. Subsequently, skateboarders recycle every imaginable street feature: gutters, handrails, street furniture, bases of statues, and a banks marble steps.

In spite of 20th century left wing rhetoric, the city is no longer merely a functional concrete Moloch, aimed towards disciplining the weak-willed proletariat, but an interactive framework that we can design, manipulate and transform. In fact, the city seems more like a computer game. People design their own public spaces, create their own architecture, their own city.

In addition to this, graffiti and skateboarding are a gift to a city: public spaces become places where skills are of great importance. In an era where expertise is not required to find work, and self esteem and respect is no longer determined by mastering a trade; street skills provide a unique alternative. Under the motto 'If you can't do anything, you are nothing', young people increasingly resort to skills they would never have been able to learn at school or at work.

Rotterdam is at this moment preparing for the architecture biennial. The main theme is 'Mobility'. Hordes of architects, city planners and artists will surely make their way to the 'Maasstad'. Conferences dealing with the most significant subjects on this theme and exhibitions presenting the most visionary designs will be organised.

Meanwhile, skaters and graffers are making the city more mobile than ever; skateboarding is more thrilling than waiting for public transport, graffiti pieces more stimulating than most art in public spaces and street skills more entertaining than theatre.

The more ingenious the design of a public space becomes, the more challenged its users will feel and the more creative they will become in using it. In other words, vandalism – such as graffiti and skate boarding, seen as invaluable by many – was created by the post modern city.