A different set of wheels: Rollerskaters in the Vauxhall/Nine Elms Sainsbury's Car Park and Social Justice in the City

It's just after 6pm on a Friday and I'm surrounded by over 100 rollerskaters, though the oldest one is just twenty-three years' old. Those taking a break from the high-octane speed-skating are chatting and smiling in small groups. Some are filming the activities or playing music, others wait to break their fast (it's during Ramadan). It's a scene one expects to find only in summer, yet instead it's a cold and wet evening in March and we are in a Sainsbury's car park in Nine Elms – the dimly lit, concrete horizons a playground for the young rollerskaters. Just outside the entrance, where escalators take customers up to the store, is a security guard watching the festivities, occasionally conversing with whomever is listening on the other end of his walkie-talkie. A flash passes me. Then another, and another; at any one time, there are around 30 people skating, their wheels like silk on the smooth tarmac – a favourable surface for the speed and adrenaline these young people are seeking. A few moments later an electric car comes around the corner, looking to park at the charging station which doubles as a skating break area. Casually, the skaters – some just fourteen years' old – glide around the car, in which sits a panic-stricken driver.

"We're used to it" says Tee – an eighteen-year-old girl who comes here every day despite living an hour away. "We've got nowhere else to go. They've kicked us out of Stratford, out of Canning Town. This is the only place for skaters in London besides the street".

This case is bigger than a car park. It's about issues of youth justice made visible through neoliberal relayering projects in cities, here represented by the Nine Elms/Battersea megadevelopment. It's a story of youth rebellion, and how rollerskating offers an embodied practice of play and creativity which enables young people to assert their right to the city (Lefebvre, 1996). First, the Vauxhall Nine Elms Battersea megadevelopment (NEMP) is examined in relation to the neoliberal city, with particular focus on social injustice through depoliticisation. Secondly, the role of skating as a means to assert urban youth social justice is offered, drawing on ideas of embodiment and play. Thirdly, public perceptions of the

skaters and dynamics of quasi-private space are detailed, before final reflections on the future of skating in the car park conclude this case of social justice in the city.

Layers below: The Vauxhall Nine Elms Battersea megaproject and youth neglect in the neoliberal city

Dubbed 'Dubai-on-Thames', the Nine Elms megaproject represents a strategic capital relayering which is encouraging the social upgrading of London (Mayer, 2021; Hutton, 2021). As Hutton notes, such spaces can offer more convivial forms of urbanism, yet at the same time produce "new experiences of exclusion and marginality" (2021, p.8). In the case of NEMP, marginalisation has occurred at the behest of a cultural hegemony sustained by narratives of placemaking; Vijay notes "self-aware" urban planners included "twee illustrations accompanying terms like 'place' or 'community' … to render dissent to the development as irrational and unthinkable" (2018, p.612). As a result, rather than the usual story of displacement which tends to accompany regeneration projects, the NEMP's "highly aestheticized concept of place" has silenced and depoliticised indigenous residents, enabling global investments, luxury flats and mechanisms of social upgrading to move in unopposed (Ibid, p.611; Hutton, 2021). Such a power dynamic is regarded as a question of citizenship – whereby the denial of representation in public space reflects a denial of citizenship (Soja, 1989; Rogers, 1998). Arguably, young people are denied citizenship most severely in the city – owing to their disenfranchisement, minor status, and lack of economic contribution to a place which increasingly defines citizen value on financial grounds (Thomas, 2011). Moreover, codes of 'appropriate' or 'sanctioned' behaviour which accompany capital relayering projects continually plan out youth cultures and subcultures (Soja, 1989; Skelton and Gough, 2013). As territory is important for young people's sense of ownership and development, their exclusion from London's spaces presents as a social injustice (Thomas, 2011). In other words, the depoliticising impact of NEMP and its contribution to capital relayering is diminishing young people's right to the city and presence in urban space; to be young in London today is to be inappropriate, restricted and ignored.

As Thomas notes, limited social and economic opportunities drive young people inwards – a key vehicle for boredom in the urban (2011). Boredom as an urban condition has been positioned as a way to reject contemporary forces of capitalism; by being bored in the city, one becomes the antithesis of the neoliberal project (Vanolo, 2025). However, to be young and bored is to be the antithesis of youth – a time for play and learning. Many of the skaters interviewed in the car park attributed boredom as the reason they took up skating – a clear rejection of Vanolo's claim which instead argues neoliberalism *creates* boredom for young people whilst simultaneously sparking the subcultural expressions to reject it: in this case, rollerskating.

Rollerskating: when play is political

Out of boredom, depoliticisation and sociospatial rejection from the city, then, rollerskating has become young people's means of advocating justice in contemporary urban space. By design, in its non-economic activity and creative reimagining of commercial urban space,

rollerskating rejects neoliberal ideals. Such resistance is well-researched in skateboarding and public urban space, but study of rollerskating taking place on private ground intended for retail is minimal (Howell, 2008; Borden, 2019; da Silva, 2016). Whilst rollerskating is an effective means to counter the urban establishment which excludes young people, this paper contends that it is the only means of doing so due to its embodied practice; as urban development has stripped young people's right to the city so much, the only way to exercise it remains in the body. As Lefebvre reminds us:

> *"Any revolutionary project today* [...] *must, if it is to avoid hopeless banality, make the reappropriation of the body, in association with the reappropriation of space"* (Lefebvre, 1991, p.166).

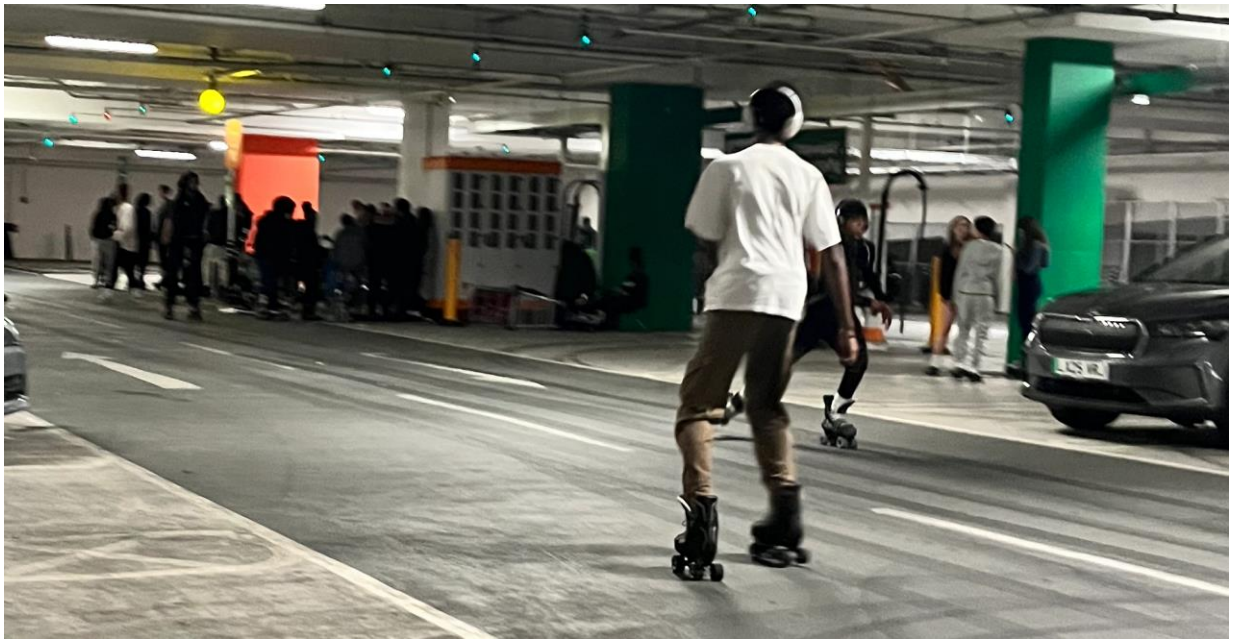
Rollerskating does this perfectly; skating forms the body differently, in "four-dimensional" ways (Khan, 2009, p.1091). Its movement refuses traditional neoliberal etiquettes of bodily frugality and restraint in urban space (Ibid). Moreover, the speed and focus demanded by skating is disengagement with consumption:

> "[When skating] *I cannot window shop. I move too fast to take in advertisements that are stationary, and hazard too many risks to pay attention to those that are on moving vehicles. I also do not participate in any consumerism"* (2009, p.1096).

Thus, rollerskates can appropriate urban space away from neoliberal functions, replacing capital demands with play and pleasure; and so, a car park becomes a playground. The right to play is related to the right to justice, as the value of "grey spaces" – the concrete/asphalt ground on which rollerskating depends – is higher for children facing greater disadvantage (Stenning, 2025). Given the majority of rollerskaters in London are Black, the liberation offered to the body through rollerskating also holds significance for advocating racial justice (Millington, 2011). Not only do playful encounters with urban space liberate the individual, but their creative engagement with it opens new possibilities for alternative ways of being. As Pyrry and Tani write on skateboarding:

> *"Both the skateboarders and the city re-emerged in the encounter, they changed with it. This change of things does not need to be representational to be important, the point is that it is felt. This momentary intensity of feeling, affect, is the workings of power, it is a force that circulates both within and between bodies: it can then be contagious and transferred"* (2019, p.1221).

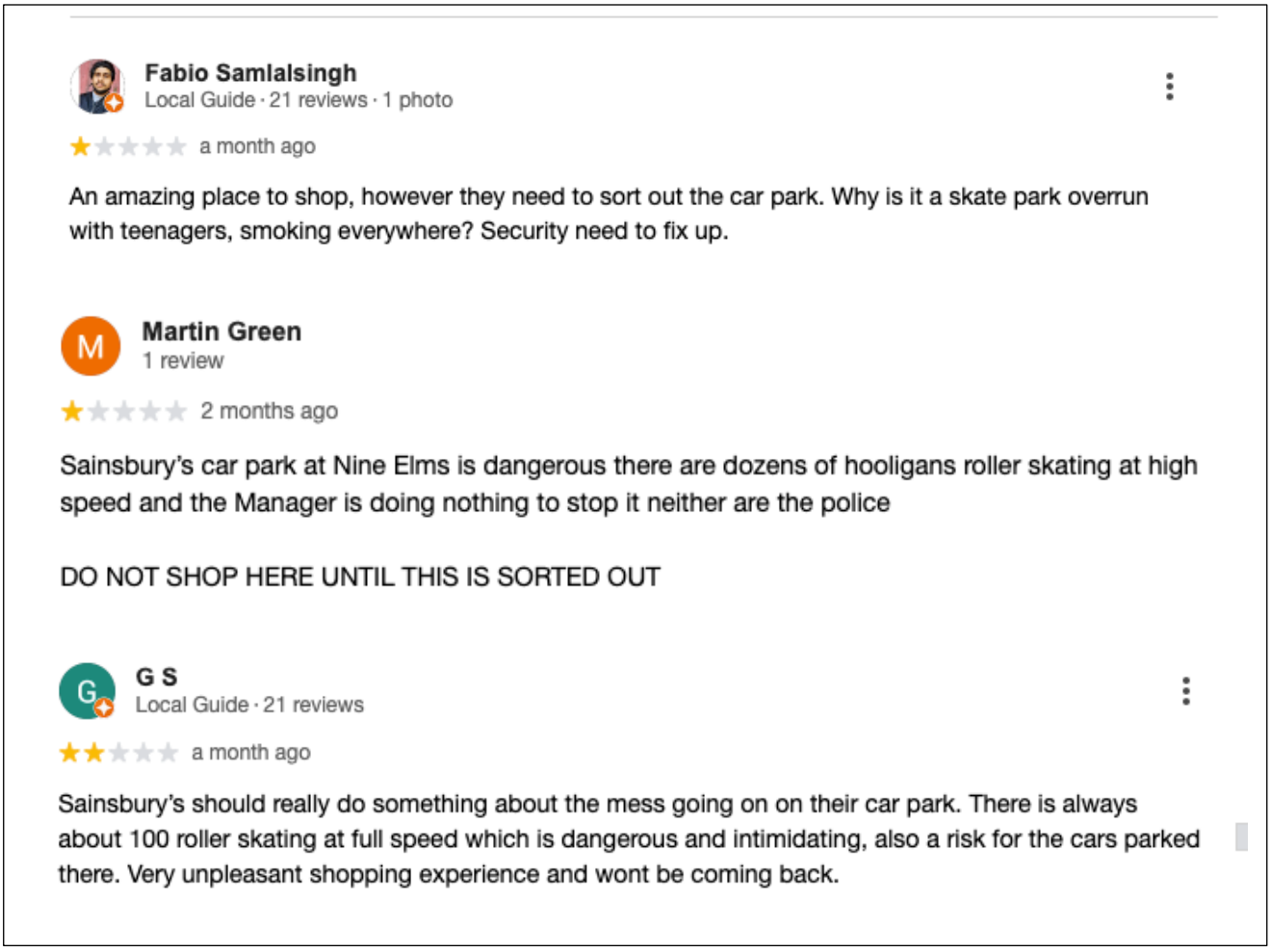
In its creative disruption, the play in rollerskating is political – championing Lefebvre's 'right to difference' and opening up the city to new associations which promote social justice (Millington, 2011). Crucially, this creative reimagining occurs away from adult supervision and authorised sites of youth activity, which reinforce neoliberal order and discourage improvisation (Aitken, 2001; Pyrry, 2017; Franck and Stevens, 2007). The Sainsbury's car park in question is certainly not a permitted site of urban play; its quasi-private status leaves skaters vulnerable to opposition.



Sainsbury's skaters: trespassers?

Despite the powerful role urban skating plays in liberating young people, the Sainsbury's staff and general public in this case largely view them as a nuisance. Given the skating occurs on an unstructured site of youth activity, where children as young as fourteen are unsupervised, and participants risk injury, there is risk of liability for Sainsbury's. Yet the duty manager I spoke with was instead concerned with the effect on customers – claiming the skaters deterred them; several Google reviews corroborate (below). At the site, public

concerns of safety related to race; one woman I spoke to admitted she was “scared to leave [her] car”, describing the scene as a “ghetto”. Other customers, notably those who were not White, were pleased to see the skaters “doing something productive”, but insisted it happen “somewhere else”. Such insights indicate that race could influence public perceptions of rollerskaters and demonstrates the ‘rational’ codes of behaviour in contemporary urban space, which serve to brand subcultures as “trespassers” in it (Soja, 1989; Borden, 1998, p.50).



Fabio Samlalsingh
Local Guide · 21 reviews · 1 photo

a month ago

An amazing place to shop, however they need to sort out the car park. Why is it a skate park overrun with teenagers, smoking everywhere? Security need to fix up.

Martin Green
1 review

2 months ago

Sainsbury’s car park at Nine Elms is dangerous there are dozens of hooligans roller skating at high speed and the Manager is doing nothing to stop it neither are the police

DO NOT SHOP HERE UNTIL THIS IS SORTED OUT

G S
Local Guide · 21 reviews

a month ago

Sainsbury’s should really do something about the mess going on on their car park. There is always about 100 roller skating at full speed which is dangerous and intimidating, also a risk for the cars parked there. Very unpleasant shopping experience and wont be coming back.

Ironically, the only time the young skaters were not viewed as trespassers during my visit was when they purchased things from the Sainsbury's store – a dynamic which aptly reveals the prioritisation of commerciality in the neoliberal city (Hutton, 2021). Yet, whilst the skaters were welcome to shop, their skates were not; a bizarre scene occurred: teenagers wearing socks, purchasing sweets and camping chairs to enjoy in the space they are encouraged not to use by the company they are buying from. Such a messy relationship leaves important realisations for the social justice of youth in the city: namely, the right to the city for youth is negotiated on the basis of their economic contribution; welcome when they consume, unwelcome when they challenge notions of behaviour in urban space through playful activity.

Concluding reflections and predictions

This case of youth social justice in London, in a quasi-public site of retail and through an embodied sport which is largely popular amongst racial minorities, has revealed the symbiotic relationship between neoliberal neglect and the development of youth subcultures. As Brenner and colleagues understand, instabilities presented by urban capitalism are the mechanisms for its "continual reinvention" (2011, p.4). In other words, the Sainsbury's car park skaters have evolved as a direct consequence of prioritising economic capital over play and creativity. In refusing to remain on the "edge" of the city, these young skaters have opted to be "seen and heard" to affirm their right to contemporary urban space (da Silva, 2016, p.302). as Lefebvre notes:

> *"each time a social group refuses to accept passively its conditions of existence, of life, or of survival,* [and] *to master its own conditions of existence, autogestion is occurring"* (2009, p. 135).

Such *autogestion* is embodied through the practice of rollerskating – an exercise of play and creativity which reimagines urban space. Whilst their activity is discouraged by Sainsbury's staff and customers, the skaters remain. But for how long? Warmer weather offered by summer months leaves less need for a covered site to skate; it is likely the skaters will prefer public parks over the summer – such as Clapham Common or Bethnal Green basketball courts – returning to Sainsbury's for the wetter and darker winter months. Such migratory behaviour, which sees the right to the city fluctuating with the seasons and the weather, is worth consideration by scholars of urban play. It holds a particular prevalence in London where, at the time of writing, there remains no covered space for rollerskaters in the city besides commercial venues with entry fees and a strictly over-18 door policy. To be a young skater in London today is to face opposition, risk banishment, and as a result, constantly explore new ways to skate in the city. From a social justice angle, the opposition facing young people's joy, attempts at community and physical activity is a stark reminder of the financialisaton of contemporary urban space that rejects youth subcultures seeking to imagine an alternative urban experience.

Word count: 1,988

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