

Insights.

Leo Valls, Skateboarding & the Equality of Space in Bordeaux

“The city is not only a place to work, consume and sleep”

Article by Joseph Andrews | @joeandrews2009@aol.co.uk | 7th December 2019

For most skateboarders, the freedom to operate in and around the city and to express themselves, is almost a mandatory requirement.

Skateboarding has been subjected to continuous preventative measures by authorities. These mechanisms have for decades remained unquestionable and contesting them has rarely been a possibility or witnessed success.

Bordeaux has been no exception. In fact, for a long time it was home to a deteriorating relationship between Skateboarders and authorities.

Leo Valls is a professional skateboarder originally from the city, and he knows this better than most. He has recalled how skateboarders were getting ticketed for rolling through the city Centre.

I was fortunate enough to be able to ask Leo some questions about the climate in Bordeaux, his approach to skateboarding, its benefits, and why cities should stride to integrate their local scenes.

How would you personally define street Skateboarding?

"An outlet that allows you to see your environment differently and to find your own identity through creativity, interactions and exploration."

"They are an expression of freedom and the act of playing and moving freely in public space is very important."

"The city is not only a place to work, consume and sleep".

Valls intuitively recognising that for skaters to reverse their suppression, open discussion and common ground between skaters and non-skaters must be achieved. Meetings between skateboarders and politicians were setup, voicing issues and conflicting interests from both sides.



His method is unusually mature, and given skateboarding's counter-cultural origins, it has been rare to witness anything other than hostility between skaters and authorities.

Pushing for Integration

Could you describe how you managed to start changing Bordeaux's stance towards skateboarders?

"First by publicly complaining about the repressive policy of the city towards skateboarding. Then by opening the dialogue between the city, the skaters and the city users. Finally by presenting skateboarding in the right context (via art shows, debates and conferences at public museums) and by explaining how skateboarding can become beneficial for everyone if we work together."

Valls was invited to discuss skateboarding's presence in Bordeaux on a local TV show. He accepted, using the opportunity to critique the city's repressive techniques. Merely days later, he was approached by the city's Mayor to discuss concerns from both sides.

He described open discussion as

"Very important, the trick really was to put ourselves in their shoes at first and understand their point of view in order to present our vision."

Progressions followed, with certain times being allocated to skaters for certain spaces. They could operate in three plazas around the city which were much-loved spots by the local skateboarding community.

The project was piloted for three months and was a success. Skateboarders stuck to the curfew and people began to view skateboarding more acceptingly as it became recognised as a legal activity by the Government.

How should local scenes push for integration in their cities?

"By getting skaters together, setting up public exhibitions where they invite their city council, being moderated and understand other people's point of views, then propose progressive ideas depending of the context."

This example has established a blueprint for how skateboarders can approach integration. Finding a middle ground where conflicting interests can subside and co-operate is an authentic dimension of Valls' approach.

Mutual respect, empathy and understanding were all essential branches for Bordeaux's progression.

Valls consistently iterates that his intentions are not for skateboarders to triumph above other groups, but to create a co-habitation of the city, where skaters can exist alongside the wider public.



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An Instalment from the 'PLAY' Project, collaborating local artists and the Skateboarding Community.

Approaching Equality of Space

Spaces should exercise equality for all to enjoy them. I think Valls has captured this essence 'to a T', and his motivation for inclusivity is highly commendable.

Integrating alternative groups can only act to make cities more wholesome, vibrant and entertaining habitats.

The way skateboarding can be used to disseminate certain values, such as the virtue of inclusivity, can only solidify its place as a contributing facet of any city's Creative Class.

Integrating skateboarding cannot be entirely positive for the transitioning subculture, as Valls argues that it should be approached with scepticism:

"It can be dangerous if cities use it only to gentrify certain areas and actually use skateboarding in a way to push consumerism in these areas."

These thoughts echo wider theory detailed by Urban theorist and ex-pro skater *Ocean Howell*. He has highlighted the opportunity for exploitation by City planners; they can use skateboarding to sweep out 'undesirable' groups and gentrify areas, proceeding to prohibit skateboarding in the area once urban transformation has been complete.

Bordeaux has become a leading example of progressive policymaking through interaction, understanding and acceptance from both sides of the court.

With any hope, future cities will recognise the importance of inclusivity and the value of co-habitation.

Thank you to Leo Valls for lending his time and thoughts, and for pushing for Skateboarding's inclusion in the City.