

DIY skateparks: creating, skating, and better living in the city

This four-year research project (October 2024–October 2028), funded by the Swiss National Science Foundation, examines the governance of Do-It-Yourself (DIY) skatepark projects and their contribution to youth well-being.

This research adopts an alternative perspective by examining how collective and participatory interventions—often informal—within one’s own environment, and the forms of interpersonal engagement they entail, can generate well-being, autonomy, and a sense of citizenship among young people. In contrast to the dominant literature, which primarily emphasizes risks and dangers, this study considers DIY skatepark initiatives as genuine civic practices that foster interpersonal development, social inclusion, and urban participation.

This research starts from the premise that the engagement of youth collectives in participatory urban DIY projects, such as skateparks, enables them to develop specific activities and skills. By taking part in these initiatives, they appropriate their living environments and strengthen their presence within the city and its surroundings. The study also investigates how such projects contribute to the creation of convivial and inclusive public spaces, fostering urban atmospheres that are welcoming to all.

Grounded in an interpretative qualitative approach that combines theoretical contributions from urban studies, anthropology, sociology, and social work with technical and practical knowledge of skatepark construction, this study seeks to address the following question: how does the governance of DIY skatepark projects foster young people’s well-being?

To analyze the conditions that enable DIY skatepark projects and to assess the effects that construction and maintenance processes may have on the well-being of the young participants, the study adopts a multi-sited ethnographic design across several Swiss cities. Four significant sites are explored in parallel through a participatory action research methodology.

Conducted by an interdisciplinary and bilingual research team (French and Swiss German), the investigation pursues three main objectives:

- to understand the governance processes at play in each of the four DIY skatepark projects;
- to examine how these processes encourage collective participation;
- to analyze the impact of this participation on young people’s well-being.

The four sites, located across four cantons (Fribourg, Bern, Jura, and Neuchâtel), display diverse contextual features and implementation strategies. While some combine DIY and prefabricated elements and their integration into municipal space varies, all share a

self-building dimension and are driven by youth collectives aged between 14 and 25. Each project, in its own way, interacts with representatives of local public authorities, external partners, and occasional participants.

These DIY skateparks—products of informal and sometimes temporary urbanism, yet also indicative of the gradual, more or less formal, institutionalization of contemporary youth subcultural practices—are examined through the lens of institutional ethnography and pragmatic models of participation. Data collection and analysis follow an iterative principle and rely on a combination of ethnographic methods:

- participant observation in various situations at each DIY skatepark, supported by field notes and audiovisual recordings;
- semi-structured interviews with members of the collectives and other actors involved;
- documentary analysis of texts and audiovisual productions created by the collectives, their partners, public authorities, and other stakeholders, particularly through social media, newspapers, and communication materials.

Data analysis is conducted through thematic coding using NVivo software. Beyond the fieldwork results, the knowledge generated will serve as a basis for the development of various tools, such as a guide for public administrations, video podcasts for stakeholders interested in skatepark construction, and resources for young people wishing to form associations.