

CALIFORNIA CONCRETE
A LANDSCAPE OF SKATEPARKS

California Concrete: A Landscape of Skateparks

By Amir Zaki (with essays by Tony Hawk and Peter Zellner)

Merrell, £35

Amir Zaki, whose amazing photography is the centrepiece of this book, feels that skateparks are 'anti-architecture'. They are carved into the earth rather than built above it. But equally, he believes, they are 'the most extreme example of Brutalist [building]'.

Zaki's super-high-definition, multi-layered digital images capture the curvaceous concrete of California's parks. The shots feature hard landscapes devoid of people but often including birds, representing the freedom of flight felt by skaters. Often taken at daybreak, the images commonly include brooding skies that echo the grey of the concrete below. His is not the sun-drenched California of films and travel brochures, but an altogether harder environment. As someone who 'grew up skateboarding', Zaki photographs his subject from the skater's viewpoint, immersing the observer in the spills and thrills to be found in unforgiving concrete craters.

FORMS AND TEXTURES

Insightful supporting essays are offered by internationally renowned skateboarder Tony Hawk and architect Peter Zellner. Hawk explains his own formative experiences of skateboarding in San Diego's Del Mar Skate Ranch – the only skatepark then surviving in California after others had succumbed to insurance and liability issues. He adds how his own Foundation has since helped fund 600 new skateparks across the US, helping to meet demand in deprived urban areas, but has also worked to improve design. Hawk has found that designers have not always understood their users' needs and that public authorities, in accepting lowest

tenders, have often produced sites that are 'subpar'.

Peter Zellner offers fascinating thoughts on the mid 1970s rise of skateboarding in California, explaining how extreme climatic conditions provided an unexpected catalyst for the construction parks. Surfers had been forced onto land by stormy conditions. Summer droughts followed and led to the draining of California's many swimming pools. Surfers were able to adopt the empty pools for four-wheeled use and to develop a new skateboarding counterculture. In a short space of time the architecture of the pools was echoed in new purpose-designed skateparks, allowing riding that was not just horizontal but vertical within 'bowls, full pipes, half-pipes, quarter-pipes, ramps, pyramids, snake runs, cradles, tombstones, kidneys, spines and other geometric or organic forms' – all cast creatively from the infinitely flexible material that is concrete. Zellner writes of these as 'sensuous carvings and cavities, complex and sculptural empty vessels.'

Zaki too notes that his photographs capture 'empty vessels', though he acknowledges the materiality of the sites in his 'great appreciation of these large concrete pours'. Though Zaki manages to capture space in an extraordinary manner, to a SPAB eye it is the forms and textures that are most striking; in the craftsmanship of construction, but also in the sites' patination. The surfaces of the concrete are often heavily weathered, patch-repaired and marked with evidence of lives lived on skateboards. Additionally, they are fascinating exercises in drainage, providing pools that must be free of water to allow surfing in the air.

Zaki's photographs illustrate in the finest detail 'every shape, line, transition, hip... kidney, clover, [and] square...' They show concrete in tight sculptural forms, but also concrete as freedom.

MATTHEW SLOCOMBE, SPAB director

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