




From Stroke to Stoke: The Multiple Sporting Legacies of the Southern California Home Swimming Pool

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ABSTRACT

Despite its celebrated place in the American imagination, the backyard pool as both object and technology has largely gone unexamined by historians. In this paper, we begin to remedy that gap, tracing its explosive rise back to 1940s Southern California. From there, we examine the various technological, economic, and architectural forces that guided its journey from plaything of the rich to banal accoutrement of backyards across the Southern Californian suburbs. But as quickly as they appeared, pools morphed into something new, and wholly unexpected: spaces for skateboarding. As many pools were drained due to drought, water levels receded to reveal smooth walls and curves that were perfect for skating on, launching skateboarding into a new era. Additional technological advancements in truck and wheel design allowed skaters to take advantage of these gunite surfaces, whose popularity would in turn influence the construction of skateparks around the country and cause participation in the sport to explode. Drawing from both historical and architectural sources, we argue that the technological advancement of these two sports was brought about not just by inventors but by individuals adapting existing technology to new sportive purposes.

KEYWORDS

Swimming;
skateboarding;
California;
technology;
Los Angeles

The ultimate luxury is to turn the world into what it is not.¹

– Thomas A.P. Van Leeuwen

The best term for the nonhierarchical system around which skate performance is judged is one that I am a hundred percent certain the Illusion, whatever he's doing now, has spoken of at least twice in the last hour. The term is stoke, and we might, for now, leave it at that.²

– Kyle Beachy

The pool, in many ways the most banal of structures, has over the last century become a deeply important site in American history. Public pools began popping up in eastern cities in the late 1800s, and quickly became the stages upon which

many of the conflicts of the ensuing century played out.³ But it wasn't until the post-World War II era that backyard pools began to become widely available. The shift from the era of public pools to private ones was only possible through a confluence of social, economic, environmental, political, and architectural forces, all of which will be touched on here. But most important was a technological innovation—the invention of gunite. This new construction method allowed thousands of pools to be built quickly and cheaply, and for the first time, in irregular shapes with smooth, curved sides. This backyard revolution was centered on Southern California, where many times more pools were being built than anywhere else. But when drought came for the region in the 1970s, those gunite pools were drained, and transformed into ramps that would launch a new era of skateboarding. In the late 1960s and early 1970s, skaters gained access to many new skateboard technologies relating to axle and wheel design. These made the boards both faster and more stable, allowing riders to perform feats only dreamed about in earlier years. Pools became a common place to test limits, as the bowed gunite walls of drained pools helped skaters to unlock new modes of skating. These new modes helped popularize the sport, as the 1970s saw more people skating than ever before. Thus, the technological advances for one sport ended up being adapted to fill the needs of a second, as pool designs would go on to greatly inform the design of skateparks in the late 1970s (Figure 1). This highlights how technological



Figure 1. Skater Dennis Martinez at Skateboard Heaven skate park. Notice how the line of tiles at the top of the bowl create the look of a drained pool. *National Skateboard Review*, 3, no. 1 (1978): 7.

advancement can be driven not just by inventors, but by individuals adapting existing materials for novel uses.

In addition to novel observations on the history and evolution of the pool, this article is significant in foregrounding the importance of space. Often, sport scholars tend to focus on the action taking place on the field or the individuals doing them. Less attention has been paid to the field itself.⁴ This lack of analysis results in many academics often taking physical space for granted, viewing it as fixed, unchanging. But the relationship between person and place is important, for sport only happens when both interact. Certainly, literature exists on sites like stadia and locker rooms, but as yet researchers have not fully explored the many other sites where sport occurs—sites like the backyard.⁵

The backyard pool holds an incredibly powerful place in the pantheon of American iconography. As the *Los Angeles Times* correctly points out, its story ‘was written largely in Los Angeles.’⁶ Like the two-car garage, the backyard in-ground pool has in many ways become a hallmark of the middle class, a symbol of achieving the so-called American Dream, especially in the Cold War era.⁷ In 1967, the *Philadelphia Evening Bulletin* observed how the pool had become a symbol of a certain standard of living, writing ‘We seemed to have moved from the fabulous idea of a chicken in every pot to a swimming pool in every backyard.’⁸ For many upwardly mobile Americans, putting in an in-ground pool was akin to ‘making it.’ Like the image of the two-car garage, the in-ground pool as suburban staple is a relatively recent phenomenon. Though private pools trace back to the Gilded Age, it was only ever the Xanadu’s of the world that had them. It was not until after World War II that pools began dotting backyards across suburbia, and nowhere did they multiply more rapidly than in Southern California.⁹

No singular reason exists for the sudden proliferation of backyard pools in the postwar years, and many fall beyond the scope of this paper. For example, one African American newspaper argued in 1946 that the pool boom was a result of the combination of increased pollution of natural bodies of water and returning soldiers having learned to swim while in the armed forces.¹⁰ Others have suggested that fears of the polio virus played a role.¹¹ But two confluent factors seem to stand above the rest. The first explanation has to do with the technological innovation of gunite leading to a sudden drop in prices for pools, making them affordable to many families for the first time. This affordability was compounded by banks beginning to allow customers to borrow loans to put in pools, which they could pay back over time. Affordability was complemented by a second factor: architecture. Ranch style houses, which were being built across the California suburbs in the fifties and sixties, proved uniquely suited for backyard pools.

This paper begins by exploring the history of gunite, before showing how it caused pool prices to plummet and the number of pools being built to explode. Then it will explain how architectural trends and aesthetic choices led to more irregularly shaped pools with curved walls—pools that would prove to be perfect for skating in. Finally, we show how these pools, following the 1970s drought and aided by a revolution in skateboard design, transformed into the perfect incubators for a new generation of skateboarding.

The Invention of Gunitite

Perhaps the individual most important to the spread of Southern California swimming pools was, surprisingly, an east coast taxidermist now buried in the Congo. Carl Akeley, considered the father of modern taxidermy, is also responsible for the creation of gunitite, a construction technique that made pools much less expensive to build. Gunitite is a system of applying concrete, delivered as a spray through a pressurized hose onto rebar. Submitted to the US Department of the Interior's Patent Office in September 1909 and officially patented in May 1911, gunitite was the result of the evolution of a tool Akeley had created for his taxidermy work, 'an enlarged atomizer... that used compressed air to spray on colored plaster of paris.'¹² Frederick Skiff, the director of the Field Columbian Museum, where Akeley worked at the time, encouraged him to improve the plaster-gun so it could be used to recoat the fading façade of the building. After a few months of tinkering, Akeley managed just that, never imagining the many sporting uses his new technology would eventually be applied to.

President Theodore Roosevelt, Akeley's friend and traveling companion, saw the commercial potential for the tool, and encouraged Akeley to continue to improve upon and patent it. Akeley eventually sold the rights to the engineering firm of S.W. Taylor, setting it on the path for wider applications—among them, swimming pool construction. This connection, however, was not made until 1938, with the patent filed by Frank F. Beeby, who was an employee of Taylor's Cement Gun Company. Up until this point, pools had been built mostly out of stone or marble, as concrete was not strong enough to support the walls. As Beeby explains the problem, 'the construction of such a pool was usually a very expensive operation in that the side and end walls were heavy retaining walls to support the pressure of the adjacent earth and these retaining walls were of considerable depth.'¹³ Gunitite solved these problems by having the strength to support the weight at only a few inches thick, making pools much less costly to build. Additionally, gunitite allowed pools to be constructed in any shape, limited only by imagination. Whereas previously pools were all corners, flat surfaces, and right angles, now they could bend and curve to your heart's desire (Figure 2).

Paddock Engineering Co. was the major player in California pool construction in the early days. Founder Pascall Paddock began his career as a masonry contractor building custom pools for movie stars in the 1920s and '30s.¹⁴ Then, each pool was a massive undertaking, as they were normally dug by hand and so were incredibly expensive—\$5,000–\$10,000 in 1920s dollars. At the time, maybe 20 new pools were being dug each year.¹⁵ Being one of the only firms in a nascent industry, Paddock Engineering was well positioned to capture much of the business when middle and upper-middle class people began to build their own pools. Paddock was always experimenting, seeking out ways to improve his pools and decrease costs. He pioneered the use of single-shell pools and plaster to prevent leakages at seams. So, it makes sense that his company would experiment with gunitite, discovering its usefulness for pool construction. As early as 1940, then-president Phillip Ilsley (who had bought Paddock's company from him) praised the impact of gunitite, saying that 'Our improved methods of construction have really brought swimming pools within

reach of everybody.¹⁶ Ilsley was an artist and architect who had previously designed river-pools, using plants to disguise the flat walls and sharp corners.¹⁷ He was also a believer in the virtues of concrete, commissioning a house built entirely out of it.¹⁸ Given these interests, he was clearly drawn to gunite and its vast untapped potential in pool construction. The first such pool was built in either 1938 or 1939.¹⁹

The Pool Boom

Gunite caused the price of pools to plummet. By 1950, a sizeable 34 × 16ft pool could be had for just \$2,000 in 1950s dollars.²⁰ This means that, when accounting for inflation, prices had been slashed by about 80% in real dollars from three decades earlier. But other factors contributed to the pool construction boom as well. Over time, technological advances for filters and chemical balancing made pools both less costly and less time-intensive to maintain.²¹ Additionally, the 1950s brought about the reclassification of pools as ‘home improvements’, meaning they were eligible for bank financing for the first time. This helped open the floodgates, letting more people purchase pools than just those that could pay up front in full. By 1958, ‘more than two-thirds of all residential pools built in the United States were financed through banks or mortgage and loan companies.’²² One 1961 *Times* article, citing the National Swimming Pool Institute, claimed that Californians could buy pools for three quarters the price paid by the rest of the country, as the competitive market depressed prices. Builders could keep their own costs down, too, as the mild winters meant pool walls didn’t need to be as thick as they did in the North and East parts of the country. The article explained that as a result, over a third of the nation’s 290,000 pools were in-state. ²³



Figure 2. Though here being used to build a canal in 1937, this same method of construction would go on to be adapted for the construction of swimming pools, making them drastically cheaper and faster to build. #294602, U.S. National Archives and Record Administration.

In 1960, the Los Angeles region accounted for 20% of all newly installed pools in the entire country.²⁴ Three years later, the number of pools had exploded to almost 150,000 in California alone, with three fifths of all new pools being installed in the southern part of the state.²⁵ At 19,000 pools annually and growing, Southern California was building more, faster than anywhere else. One pool contractor summed up the sunny outlook of this now billion-dollar industry for both buyers and sellers:

While the prices of everything else have gone up, pool prices have not. People today are in a better position financially to own pools, which are now competitive to a second car. Banks consider pool paper to be excellent because most people who own their own homes are financially stable. A swimming pool is a plain good investment.²⁶

Thus, the adoption of gunite—along with evolving bank lending rules—resulted in an incredibly rapid expansion of pool construction. In the two decades from 1940 to 1960, pools transformed from luxury good to common household item in Southern California. New installations would peak in 1964, with numbers only slightly off that through the rest of the decade.²⁷

Why Southern California?

The invention of gunite and resulting affordability of the pool would have allowed any part of the country to have taken advantage of these new altars of leisure. Historian Jeff Wiltse claimed that the national building spree kicked off in 1952, but by that point, backyard pools in Southern California had already become so common as to have been relegated to the butt of jokes in the funny papers four years prior.²⁸ Though pool construction continued to increase rapidly as the '50s and '60s wore on, the seeds that allowed Southern California to become such fertile ground for this nascent industry had been sown decades before. As historian Lawrence Culver laid out in *The Frontier of Leisure*, the priorities of those present in the early planning of the city of Los Angeles ended up setting the course for the entire region. Los Angeles set aside almost no land for public parks or playgrounds, a radical departure from how more Eastern cities had been planned. As Culver wrote, 'Southern California, and the suburbs that emulated it, followed a very different model. Instead of bringing nature into the city, they brought the city into nature, dispersing housing and allotting private yards rather than public parks.'²⁹ In no other part of the country could swimming pools have become so fashionable so fast, because nowhere else had entire counties of houses with yard space primed for such development. It was this set up in Southern California that, according to Culver, eventually bled into the design and development of suburbs across the country. As historian Robert Fishman believed, Southern California was the first area of the country in which suburban houses and lifestyles were available to a bigger segment of the population than just the superrich.³⁰

Though the lack of park space can certainly be attributed to the profiteering motives of early politicians, the results fed into locals' belief in a type of 'California exceptionalism'. As Culver wrote, 'Local promoters and outside observers alike asserted that Los Angeles was a new sort of city, unlike those of the East or even other western cities. Some of them believed that this new city would not need an

extensive park system, for it had transcended the traditional urban ills that make parks necessary.³¹ This fed into the vision of California as a land of leisure. As one early Californian wrote, ‘Eastern cities are swelling with Americans who move in to make money; California is filling (country and city) with Americans who move in to make a Life. In a word, it is the Chosen Country.’³² Thus the sacrifice of a traditional city park system planted the seeds from which swimming pools would bloom across the region.

This Chosen Country was also unapologetically white. Historian Kirse Granat May wrote that ‘From the beginning, the history of California was told from a white perspective, dismissive of the Native and Spanish past, using the gold discovery as the dawn of the California story.’³³ Southern California and Los Angeles specifically have been described as ‘the sunny refuge of white Protestant America,’ the last holdout from diversification that had occurred in many cities back east as part of the Great Migration.³⁴ This earned Los Angeles the nickname the ‘White Spot.’³⁵ Black Californians, subject to racist banking and housing practices, were often excluded from the region’s new suburbs, instead gravitating towards black enclaves like Santa Monica and its beaches for leisure.³⁶ So all this is to say that, when talking about pools or suburban living becoming more accessible, that needs to be understood in a specifically white context.

Likewise, swimming as both a sport and leisure activity has class-based aspects that deserve mention. The post-war era was marked by the rise of the white-collar job and the accompanying middle class. This new demographic, especially in Southern California where communities were being built from scratch, would have had a need for identifying activities and shared experiences to construct community identity.³⁷ Swimming, with its high barriers to entry, became one of those activities. Sociologist Derek Wynne, in his study of twentieth century suburbia, found that there was ‘a link between social origin/educational capital and sports histories,’ with those who went to college significantly more likely to swim recreationally than those that did not (though the gap is not as large as it is for racket sports).³⁸ ‘The higher the educational capital, the greater the likelihood of frequent participation.’³⁹ Wynne also found that entertaining guests at home was an increasingly common practice among the middle and upper classes. Additionally, pools, in creating a space where it is appropriate to bare one’s body, can allow users to flaunt their health and fitness, which is another way of asserting class status. Thus, the drive to install a backyard pool for some likely came from the larger pursuit of social capital.

Pool-friendly Architecture

One of the more important contributions to the creation of the image of California as an idyllic white suburbia was made by Cliff May, a prominent California housing designer during the mid-century. Though not officially an architect until later in life, May still practiced the craft, popularizing the ranch style house, which took advantage of Southern California’s mild climate. These houses would lend themselves to having backyard pools due to their many sightlines to the outdoors, which made homeowners more cognizant of how the space was being used. May’s unique style found a fan in Elizabeth Gordon, editor of the taste-making magazine *House*

Beautiful, which would frequently do entire issues on May's houses, showing them to a national audience. As a result, ranch houses began springing up by the thousands in developments around Southern California—and eventually, the nation. May's ranch house drew on the tradition of California bungalows and rancheros, constructing low-lying, rambling houses designed to take advantage of the area's moderate climate. 'One room deep, it was crucial that the house take an L- or U- shaped configuration to form a patio or courtyard in the back so that the rooms of the ranch house faced or opened into these areas.'⁴⁰ For his work, May is credited with popularizing the concept of the backyard being viewed as a more direct extension of the house, as a room unto itself instead of something separate. The domestic duality of the ranch house 'became associated with "the California way of life" of living casually, comfortably, and out-of-doors.'⁴¹ May used these houses to popularize the sliding glass door to the outside. Now common, the door allowed the backyard to be literally seen in a way that it had never previously, making homeowners much more invested in the aesthetic value of their exterior spaces. Homeowners were subliminally encouraged to do something with the back part of their lots—something like put in a pool.

In some ways, California pools are a prime example of the adage 'everything old is new again.' Instead of drawing on the designs of the more recent but austere public pools of the east, or those of the Gilded Age billionaires whose pools were more water fixtures designed to please the eye instead of the body, California pools have more in common with the older pools of European royalty. These pools centered a pool's utility while still keeping an eye towards the aesthetic value of its surroundings. Architectural historian Thomas A.P. Van Leeuwen believed the marriage of beauty and function created something with the potential to be 'much more than just a small public pool; it could be a shrine, a nymphaeum, or a monumental or practical piece of water imbedded in the magical surroundings of a grotto,' adding, 'One recurring feature is fake naturalism.'⁴² This idea was bought wholesale by Californians who installed pools in their own homes. The odd shapes of these pools, while limiting utility when it comes to competitive swimming, would end up being key to their usefulness as a place for skateboarding.

Earlier in the century, when pools were still only the playthings of the rich, they were constructed in irregular shapes and surrounded with rocks and flora to evoke the idea of a natural pool. The previously-quoted Philip Ilsley, President of Paddock Engineering, explained constructing such a pool for one Hollywood star: 'Most of the unusual patterns are dreamed up by customers who can afford to satisfy some latent longing. Actress Joan Fontaine apparently dreamed of being a mermaid standing on a rocky island, so my men sprayed, with the so-called 'gunite' method, her pool with an island in the middle.'⁴³

This contradicts what architectural circles commonly hold to be the origin of the irregularly shaped pool.⁴⁴ Many American architects would point to the famous Donnell Garden pool as the one that ignited the trend. This kidney-shaped pool, designed by architect Thomas Church, is located in Sonoma, CA, and was featured in publications like the previously mentioned *House Beautiful*. While Donnell Garden may have helped in some way to further popularize the concept, the pool was not

completed until 1948, years after Ilsley had begun constructing similar pools. In fact, the designer behind the Donnell Garden pool, Thomas Church, drew his inspiration from a similar pool constructed at the Villa Mairea estate in Finland in 1938, which was designed by Church's friend Alvar Aalto.⁴⁵ This was right around or before Ilsley began building similar pools in Southern California, but as of yet, no connection has been made between Ilsley and the other two men.

Regardless, this trend trickled down to the families that installed pools once they became more accessible. By 1946, articles were appearing with headlines screaming 'A Swimming Pool Can Fit your Garden Plan', detailing how shrubs, rock fixtures, and irregular shapes can make backyards more suitable for entertaining and further evoke the romantic idea of the 'ole swimming hole.⁴⁶ This trend toward outdoor living and entertainment (begetting the rise of the backyard barbecue as an American institution), became so prevalent that poolside furniture became almost a requirement of pool ownership instead of an add on. As one *Times* article put it: 'Today's pool owner appreciates the fun and health aspects, but, more than before, a good part of his energy goes toward creating a beautiful background and exciting environment for his pool. Thus, landscaping effects, new outdoor furniture and accessories become a part of the picture... the pool merely becomes the focal point for a healthful, happy life outdoors.'⁴⁷ By the 1960s, the length consumers would go to to create these artificial oases reached almost a parody of Van Leeuwen's ideas with the engineering of plants that could withstand chlorine well.

The explosion in swimming pool construction in the 1950s and 1960s did coincide with the ascendance of California as a competitive swimming power both nationally and internationally. California schools began to dominate collegiate swimming, and Californians would routinely make up a majority of the Olympic swim team. Opportunities for younger swimmers to compete were expanding as well. But whether or not there was a direct connection between this and the spread of backyard pools, advertisers would often use the state's swimming dominance to their advantage. As one newspaper ad trumpeted in 1961, 'Home pools are largely responsible for our outstanding showing in the recent Olympic swimming events in which we broke the monopoly previously held by the Japanese and Australians.'⁴⁸ Manufacturers at the time would frequently advertise home pools as necessary for any child with athletic dreams in the pool, using them as a tool to upsell clients with claims such as this one, from a *Times* ad in the late 1950s: 'The teen-ager who aspires to be a diving champion will need sufficient length for safe diving from at least a 12-foot board. This means a pool not less than 35 or 40 feet long. The smallest practical pool for diving is 30 feet but the greater the length of the pool the safer the pool is for diving.'⁴⁹ That said, for many, competitive swimming wasn't even an afterthought. One *Times* writer emphasized the degree to which pools had almost become showpieces by writing 'On the ground, too, the pool becomes less a field for athletic endeavor or a bathtub and more a delightful pleasure for the eye.'⁵⁰ But what appeared to be a tradeoff between athletics and aesthetics would end up being a boon for a different sport once the pool found itself drained.

From Swimming to Skateboarding

All things must end, and the California swimming pool boom was no exception. As the 1960s wore on, backyard pools became incubators for a very different sport—skateboarding. But this time, technological advancement was driven not by a new invention, but by individuals adapting existing technology for new purposes. Young riders found that the kidney shaped pools and smooth curves of the gunite walls offered a radical new dimension of verticality to a sport previously limited mostly to flat ground and downhill execution. Proto-vertical skating could be found on the playgrounds of Southern California's public schools where gently sloped, banked walls approximated a wave, providing a surface for a carving, surf-inspired style that would be fully realized in empty pools.⁵¹ As the pool-era took hold in the mid-1970s, backyard swimming pools became incubators of new skate technology, new approaches to riding, and a more-fully realized version of the sport's rebel ethos.

Skaters were the unlikely beneficiaries of an economic downturn that made pool maintenance and operation costly, as well as the California drought spanning the winter of 1976–77, the state's driest recorded water year.⁵² With severe water restrictions, many home pools were drained, opening a landscape where the sport would develop many of the characteristics that still define it today. Born in Southern California backyards, pool riding quickly became part of the sport and region's iconography: in 1976, Craig Stecyk (writing as John Smythe) noted that, 'Even the Beach Boys use a pool-skate session to reinforce their TV special.'⁵³

Pool riding was not completely unheard of before the major drought years. Riding in pools is briefly mentioned in the debut issue of *The Quarterly Skateboarder*, the first magazine dedicated to the sport. The year was 1964 and it was the first skateboarding 'boom.' The magazine noted that the 'new fad' (of pool riding) originated in 'Roy Diedrichsen's empty pool in Menlo Park, CA.' The editors joked that emptying pools for skaters could save homeowners money on their water bills and, in a bit of foreshadowing of the skateboard park boom of the late 1970s, suggested that one day dedicated pools might be built just for skateboarding.⁵⁴ As with much else in skateboarding lore, there is some debate if Diedrichsen's pool was actually the first to be skated. Architectural and skateboard historian Iain Borden notes competing claims for the first pool ride are also made by Gary 'Swane' Swanson who drained and rode his Santa Monica (CA) pool in the mid-1960s and skaters such as Matt Hilton at the Foxtail Park pool, outside of Santa Monica.⁵⁵ But for the most part, the pools of the 1960s remained full of water. Furthermore, despite board sales in the tens of millions of dollars and the appearance of the sport on ABC's *Wide World of Sports* and the cover of *Life* magazine, the skateboarding trend was a short-lived fad, effectively dead by 1966, in large part due to the primitive technologies of the sport and the high risk of injury borne of those technologies.⁵⁶ The skateboards of the era featured hard clay or metal wheels that offered a shaky ride and would easily snag on a crack or pebble in the road, sending the rider hurtling to likely injury.

Thus, before skaters could even dream of riding in pools, the technology of the sport itself had to evolve. The critical innovation in skateboarding was the adoption of the polyurethane wheel, which had been slowly gaining traction in the rollerskate

community since the late 1960s.⁵⁷ The key limitation in bringing polyurethane to skateboarding lay in the assemblies of ball bearings and trucks (axles); skateboards used a loose bearing assembly, where rollerskate polyurethane wheels required a closed bearing assembly. Enter Frank Nasworthy, who devised a polyurethane wheel that could work with loose bearings, and formed the Cadillac Wheels company in 1973.⁵⁸ As skateboard historian Michael Brooke notes, the new wheel was responsible for the resurgence of the sport in the 1970s.⁵⁹ The polyurethane wheel not only made for a smoother, safer, and more enjoyable ride, it also opened the doors of possibility for a host of other skate innovations, developed by skateboarders, for skateboarders. Closed bearing assemblies, more stable trucks, and a host of terrain specific board designs and shapes built on the potential offered by the new wheel, reflecting technology theorist Wiebe Bijker's suggestion that technology is shaped in part by 'the ingenuity and emotional commitment of individuals.'⁶⁰

By 1975, the polyurethane wheel and the innovations that followed gave rise to the second skateboard boom. With millions of new skaters pushing the boundaries of the sport, skaters were technically and technologically prepared to reap the unexpected bounty of the 1976–77 drought.⁶¹ Equipped with the right gear, skaters transformed the empty swimming pool into an arena for reimagining skateboarding (Figure 3). In October 1976, *Skateboarder* magazine published a 'Pool Riding Symposium,' arguing in the introduction that 'Pool riding is the state-of-the-art skating style of the 70s. No other type of riding offers such a radical departure from the past, no other form progresses so swiftly towards the future. Pool riding has the juice.'⁶² The historical tension and the break with the past are an interesting claim here, as one argument for the appeal of pool-riding was that it offered skateboarding's closest approximation of the sport's surfing heritage. Interviewed in *Skateboarder*, skaters Bob Biniak and Stacy Peralta suggested that the sense of weightlessness a rider could experience riding up and down pool walls and curved pool floor transitions was akin to riding a wave.⁶³

But ultimately, the claim in 'Pool Riding Symposium' that pools pointed to the future of sport was prescient, especially in terms of going vertical. Polyurethane wheels offered enhanced traction on gunite and poured concrete pool surfaces; larger wheel sizes, sealed bearings, and advanced truck technology offered the speed and stability needed to go vertical. Skaters began by trying to climb up pool walls, aiming for a pool light or decorative tile trim as a target and marker of successful ascent. But they kept pushing, first by riding to the lip of the pool and 'grinding' their axles, eventually leaving the pool completely, performing the first aerials, whose success was measured by landing back onto the pool wall and smoothly riding away.⁶⁴ The most famous of the early pool riders were the members of Santa Monica's Zephyr skateboard team, better known as the 'Z-Boys'. Legendary Z-Boys such as Tony Alva and Stacy Peralta were canonized in the pages of *Skateboarder* magazine, their gravity-defying maneuvers inspiring readers the world over to do the same.⁶⁵ Writing in the *National Skateboard Review*, Lance Smith suggested that such images gave readers 'blue tile fever,' a condition that could only be cured by finding a pool of their own to skate.⁶⁶

As pool riders, skateboarders were engaging in technological appropriation. Technology theorist Ron Eglash argues that technological appropriation is a phase

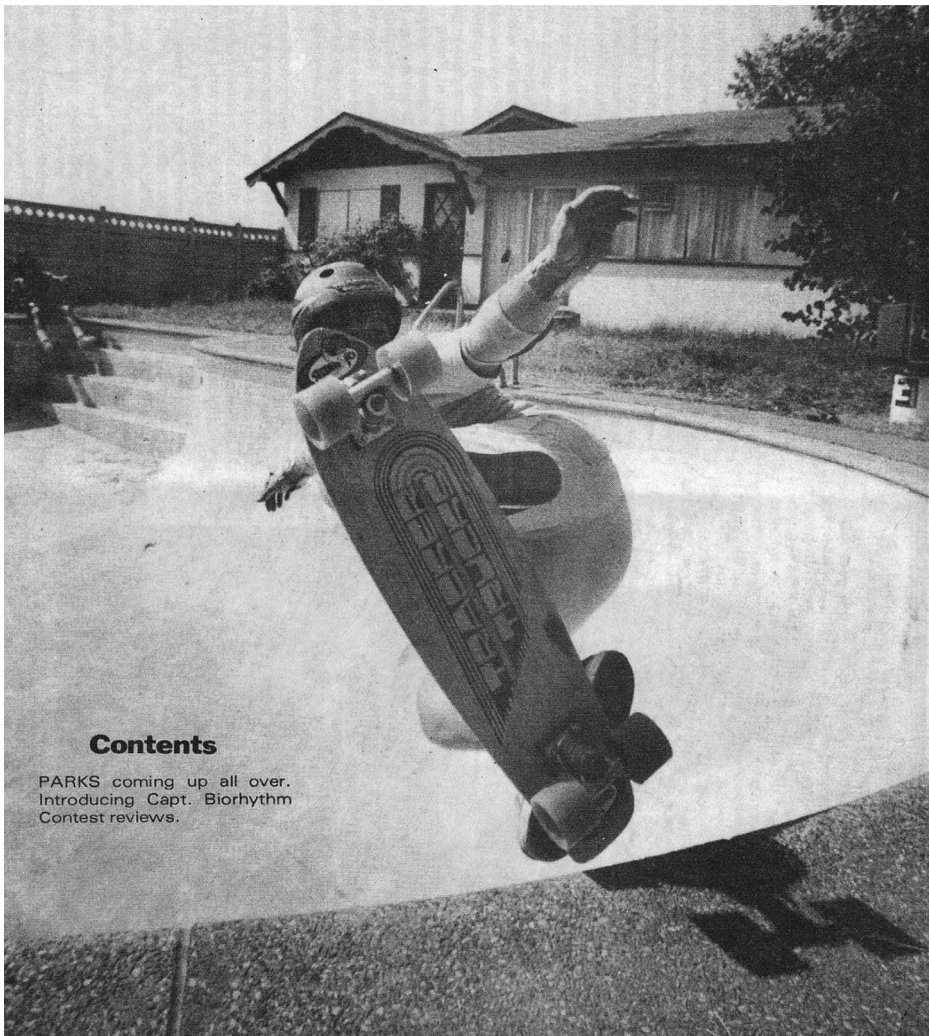


Figure 3. Skater Russ Gossnell making use of a drained pool in Southern California. *National Skateboard Review* 1, no. 8 (1976): 1.

of use in which ‘techno-science is reinterpreted, adapted, or reinvented’ by individuals outside the traditional centers of technological power.⁶⁷ A far cry from the idyllic landscapes imagined by original pool builders and owners, pool skating was transgressive, dangerous, destructive, and often required illegal trespassing.⁶⁸ Pool pioneer Stacy Peralta recounts the challenges of pool skating while avoiding being caught by home-owners or the police. ‘The people would hear you, and someone would eventually come out and tell you to leave. You’d play that cat-and-mouse game for a while, and finally the people would either jackhammer the pool or fill it with debris.’⁶⁹ That home-owners would rather destroy their pools than allow skaters to use them says much about the social status of skaters at the time (although liability was also likely a concern, and yes, the skating itself could also damage the pools).

The quest for pools rendered skaters into urban guerillas; ‘pool hunting,’ the search for drained pools, became part of skaters’ routines. As skateboarder Frank Atwater recollects, ‘One time we had a pool going in Camarillo up in the estates at a big house that was being restored. We’d sneak in on the weekday afternoons, you know, after the workers had all take off... we knew the trespassing rules; we knew the deal—show up late, in and out.’⁷⁰ The hunt is perhaps best encapsulated by a pair of consecutive articles in the November 1981 issue of *Thrasher* magazine. ‘Operation: Infiltration’ is a fictional piece that captures the spirit and the process of the hunt, from a quiet and clandestine approach to savoring the bounty of the infiltrated pool.⁷¹ ‘Infiltration’ is followed immediately by ‘On Being a Pool Mercenary’, which is essentially a field guide to scouting pools. The article opens with the skater’s dilemma, ‘You have the urge to skate vertical, but your local skatepark just closed or you never had a skatepark. You could build a ramp, but this costs money, and money is always in short supply.’⁷² The dilemma is of course resolved by ‘an abandoned pool. It’s free. No crowds, no one telling you what to do, and always heavy, full-on ripping whenever you want.’⁷³ There is a bit of irony here, with skaters seeking refuge in these reconfigured oases, at once appropriating the pools for unintended use and recreating the privatized leisure spaces they were designed as. ‘Pool Mercenary’ continues with suggestions of artifacts that indicate a pool is nearby, ‘pump houses, high pool fencing... the smell of chlorine, inflatable pool toys’ as well as the areas intrepid hunters should target, ‘Run-down areas of the city are the best. In low-rent apartment complexes, pools are often drained and unused due to upkeep costs... In some areas, the homes around airports are purchased by the Feds, due to the noise-health problems. Find an area like this and you’re in there for multiple pools.’⁷⁴

‘Pool Mercenary’ goes on to offer more advice, some sage (post a lookout for homeowners or the police) and some dubious (contact city hall to drain a pool for safety reasons). While pool skating and hunting was predominantly a Southern California activity, Borden notes that the practice occurred across the country, and even in the UK.⁷⁵ Thus, through the practice of pool hunting and the spread of articles such as these, pool skaters not only transformed what was possible in a swimming pool and on a skateboard, they also helped to cement the rebellious, anti-authoritarian subcultural identity that has long been associated with the sport.⁷⁶ As skateboarder Matt Derrick succinctly states, ‘The infiltration of empty swimming pools is the start of much of skateboarding’s outlaw image.’⁷⁷

The appropriation of the swimming pool by skaters was not just limited to reimagining the use of existing pools, as pool design and construction technology greatly informed the skateboard park boom of the 1970s. As with swimming pools, the gunite approach was preferred by many park constructors, although ‘shotcrete,’ a close relative of gunite, was also used, and there was much debate in the skateboard press over ideal materials.⁷⁸ For example, Gary Doane, an owner of the Endless Wave skatepark in Bakersfield, CA, claimed that he and his partners in park construction had built over 30,000 swimming pools and their experience suggested that ‘gunite just isn’t strong enough [for skateboarding].’⁷⁹ Regardless of the materials used, well over 200 skateboard parks were built in the United States between 1976 and 1979; almost all of them featured at least one pool-inspired,

gunitite or concrete 'bowl' for riding, essentially fulfilling the aforementioned 1964 prophecy that skaters would build pools that were never meant to see a drop of water.⁸⁰

Despite the proliferation of skateparks, many elite and hardcore skaters tended to avoid the facilities, which many felt were overcrowded and poorly constructed; the appropriated pool was still preferred, because, as Craig Stecyk (writing as John Smythe) asked, 'Have you yet seen a park as radical as the best of pools?'⁸¹ While a small number of US parks were operated by municipalities, the vast majority were private ventures, run by entrepreneurs hoping to cash-in on the popularity of skateboarding, most of whom wound up disappointed by their investments. Owing to declining interest in the sport and skyrocketing insurance premiums, most parks were shuttered by 1980, but that was not the end of the influence of the backyard swimming pool, which continued to be a viable skate-spot.⁸² The 1980s were defined by 'vert' skateboarding, on dedicated, wooden 'half-pipe' ramps. These ramps, while not full pools, were greatly informed by the technical knowledge and expressions of possibility that began in empty pools and were more fully realized in the short-lived parks. By the 1990s, a major break from vertical came in the emergence and eventual dominance of 'street' skating, which as the name suggests, takes the sport to the urban landscape. But even though street skating bore little resemblance to pool skating, it was in some ways the spiritual successor to the pool-era, both for its appropriation of non-purpose-built landscapes and the cat-and-mouse game with authority needed to access those landscapes. While street skating still reigns supreme, the legacies of the pool-era live on in the sport's constructed landscapes of the twenty-first century. Many contemporary skateboard parks still feature bowls and pool inspired designs (though they are not made of gunitite), as did the terrain for the first Olympic skateboard competitions at the Tokyo Olympic games. 1970s pool skating remains a touchstone of vintage skateboarding and California culture. It is a touchstone that now effectively transcends time and space as photographer and urban theorist Dwayne Dixon chronicles in an article on skateboarding and visual culture in Japan: 'This globalized mimesis of skateboard history was especially visible in the perfect copy of a 1970s suburban SoCal swimming pool—bone dry, of course— complete with blue tile border... We laughed at how ironic it was, as North American skaters, that we'd had to travel to Japan to actually ride skateboarding's most fetishized site of authenticity, the drained backyard swimming pool, but only as a simulacrum of itself.'⁸³

Thus ends the story of gunitite. Designed originally as a taxidermy tool, it became the vehicle that brought pools to the suburban masses. And then the same tool proved a key ingredient in sparking a skateboarding renaissance, which started the evolution of the sport into the version many are familiar with today. The key take-away here, though, is that technological advancement happens not just through invention. Individuals like gunitite inventor Akely and skate technology pioneer Nasworthy played huge roles in this tale, but just as important were the people who saw in the built environment things that its builders had not intended. And, as Bijker tells us, this individual appropriation of existing technologies for new purposes is as much a driver as anything else.

Additionally, this article highlights the value of studying space for sport historians. It is only by training our eyes to the ground that the connections between swimming pools and skateboarding could be seen. Space is dynamic, alive, and malleable. As architect Christie Pearson wrote in her study of pools and bathhouses, they ‘persist in reinventing themselves as relevant, meaningful, and of their time.’ They are ‘always busy evolving.’⁸⁴ But if this is true of pools, where else might it be true of? By foregrounding the study of sporting spaces like this, we may continue to uncover novel insights.

Notes

1. Thomas A. P. Van Leeuwen, *The Springboard in the Pond: An Intimate History of the Swimming Pool* (Cambridge, MA, 1998), 224.
2. Kyle Beachy, *The Most Fun Thing: Dispatches from a Skateboard Life* (New York: Grand Central Publishing, 2021), 47–8.
3. Jeff Wiltse, *Contested Waters: A Social History of Swimming Pools in America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2010).
4. John Bale and Patricia Vertinsky, ‘Introduction,’ in *Sites of Sport: Space, Place, Experience*, ed. Patricia Vertinsky and John Bale (London: Routledge, 2004), 1–3.
5. Bale and Vertinsky’s abovementioned book showcases the rich and varied insights that can be gained into sport through studying space, with chapters looking at ice rinks, locker rooms, college gyms, stadia, beaches, and more. See, for example, Chris Gaffney and John Bale, ‘Sensing the Stadium,’ *Sites of Sport*: 25–38, or Caroline Fusco, ‘The Space that (in)Difference Makes: (Re)Producing Subjectivities in/through Abjection—A Locker Room Theoretical Study’: 159–176.
6. ‘The Splashtiest History,’ *Los Angeles Times*, August 16, 2007.
7. The American Dream as a concept is tricky to nail down. It is the animating myth behind much of American political life, rooted in the preamble to the Declaration of Independence, which held that ‘all men are created equal,’ promising the right to ‘Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness.’ As an idea it is rooted not in a promised outcome, but rather in the opportunity to achieve a desired outcome uninhibited. But over time it took on a much more consumerist bent. The term itself has fairly recent origins, coming from James Truslow Adams’s 1931 *Epic of America*, in which he wrote of ‘the American dream, that dream of a land in which life should be better and richer and fuller for every man, with opportunity for each according to his ability or achievement.’ In usage, the term often means achieving a level of upper middle-class success, though since the dawn of the Reagan Era it can also mean achieving unimaginable wealth.
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9. Of course, any tale of water in Southern California needs reference the Los Angeles aqueduct. Opened in 1913, this critical piece of infrastructure provided the city with hundreds of millions of gallons of water a day. As one manager for the Department of Water and Power framed its significance, ‘If the aqueduct had never been built, the city would never have grown larger than 30,000 people.’ But the aqueduct’s long and fascinating history falls beyond the scope of this paper. For a study of California’s historical and current waterscape, see David Carle, *Introduction to Water in California* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2009). For an overview of the construction of the aqueduct, told through the lens of its head architect, read Les Standford, *Water to the Angels: William Mulholland, His Monumental Aqueduct, and the Rise of Los Angeles* (New York: Harper-Collins, 2015). And for a more critical examination of California’s water

- policies, and how those decisions impact the state today, go to David Carle, *Drowning the Dream: California's Water Choices at the Millennium* (Newport, CT: Praeger, 2000). But for our purposes, suffice it to say that without the aqueduct, none of what followed as it pertains to the construction of swimming pools would have been possible.
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 11. Kevin Olsen, 'Clear Waters and a Green Gas: A History of Chlorine as a Swimming Pool Sanitizer in the United States,' *Bulletin for the History of Chemistry* 32, no. 2 (2007): 135.
 12. Carl Akeley, 'Apparatus for mixing and applying plastic or adhesive material.' U.S. Patent 991,814, filed September 13, 1909 and issued May 9, 1911; Pietro Teichart, 'Carl Akeley-A Tribute to the Founder of Shotcrete.' *Shotcrete*. 2002.
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 17. Marshall Dutton, 'Sanctity of Water' (Masters diss. University of Cincinnati, 2011), 61.
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 19. Ilsley said the idea for a bowl-shape came from turn-of-the-century concrete domes that he saw in Germany.
 20. 'Swimming Pools Grow Into Large Industry,' *Los Angeles Times*, June 1, 1950.
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 25. William O. Baker, 'Pools pools pools pools pools,' *Los Angeles Times*, April 7, 1963.
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 28. Wiltse. *Contested Waters*, 199; Bufford Tune, 'Dotty Dripple comic strip #10.' *Los Angeles Times*. February 29, 1948.
 29. Lawrence Culver, *The Frontier of Leisure* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 11.
 30. Robert Fishman, *Bourgeois Utopias: The Rise and Fall of Suburbia* (New York: Basic Books, 1987), 150–70.
 31. Culver, *Frontier of Leisure*, 55.
 32. *Ibid.*, 39.
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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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