

SKANKYTOWN REQUIEM

SKATE SPOTS COME AND GO. SOME ENDURE LONGER THAN others, but even seemingly everlasting concrete can't survive the inevitable. Nothing lasts forever. The Vermont Drop, Upland, and EMB are just three examples of legendary playgrounds that have been sessioned and then destroyed over the past 30 years. The ledges, handrails, and benches that were never intended to be skated are part of the urban landscape and were built by outsiders. Their passing is mourned, but not quite as deeply as the demolition of the fanciful moonscapes skaters put their own sweat and blood into building. All that effort to transform already existing structures or to make something new from scratch and in the end they all must succumb to entropy, or more likely, malicious destruction. It has to be accepted. Rob "The Fly" Schlaefli designed Winchester's sorely-missed pink pool and after the park closed and the bulldozers arrived he shrugged it off with philosophical resignation. "Easy come, easy go; after that it will be just a popular memory."

Still, it's hard to accept at first. All those memories erased in an hour of demolition. This particular place arose on a desolate no-man's land next to the East River across from Manhattan. It wasn't much, really—not the perfection of the pool at Winchester or historically resonant



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like the Baldy Pipeline. But for less than a year it was a little oasis conjured up by skaters away from the mendacity of the so-called real world. And unlike many great structures built for skating, it was entirely devoid of the rules and distracting annoyances that can put a damper on one's enjoyment. It was completely free and had atmosphere—a lot of it. Somebody had spraypainted "Skankytown" in big blue letters early on, and though some thought that moniker too negative and preferred "The Slab," I always thought Skankytown had just the right mix of description and colorful commentary.

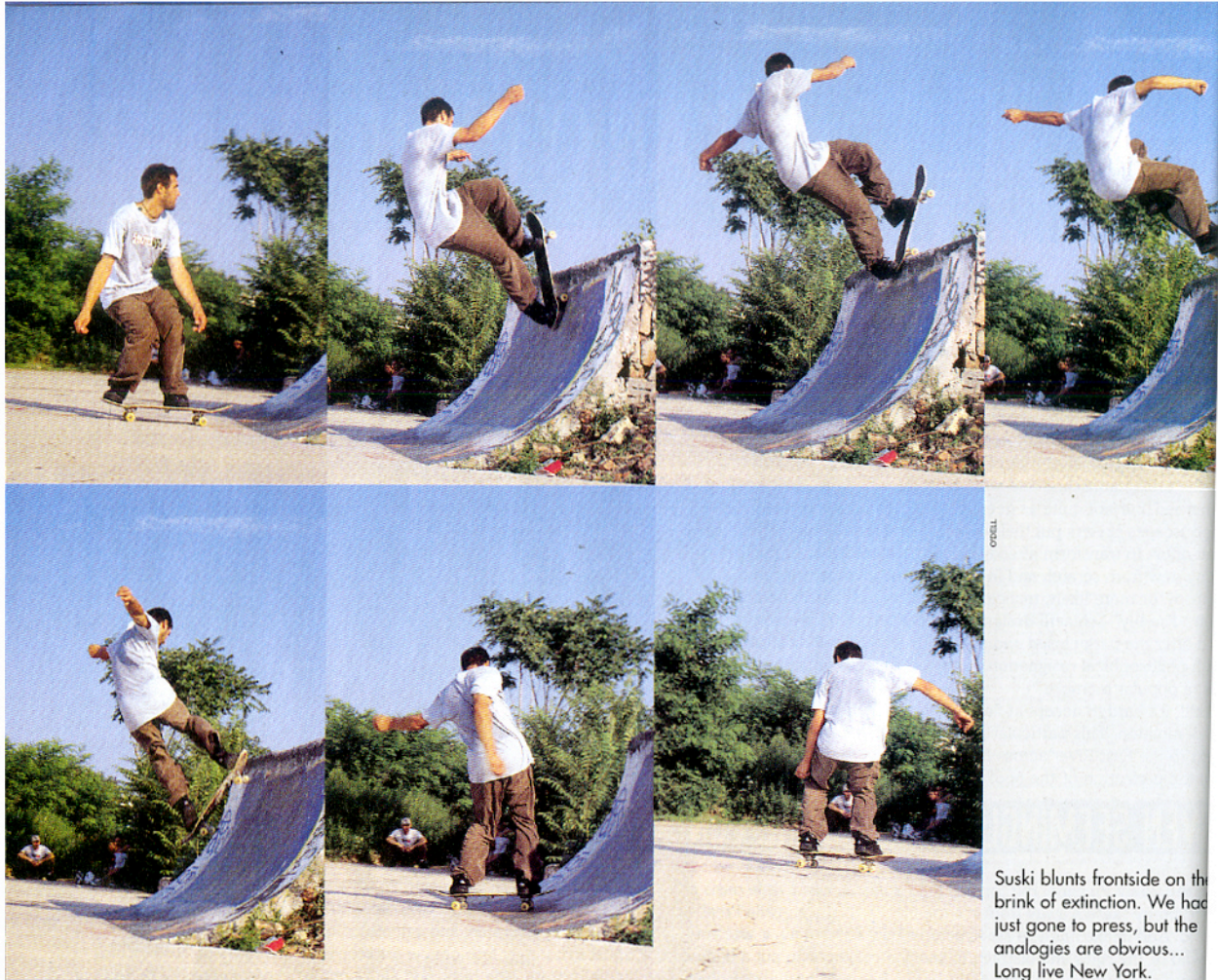
The funny thing is that it was built cheek by jowl with what is arguably the trendiest neighborhood in the world right now. A formerly

predominantly Hispanic and Polish enclave where Henry Miller grew up, Williamsburg is now overrun with 20-something hipsters frequenting bars, restaurants, and galleries. Going there is like arriving at the most irritatingly fashionable art school of the moment. A lot of skinny indie-rockers, side bags, and androgynous shoes. Go to Berlin and the haute artistes will ask you what's going on in Williamsburg. It's nauseating. Or enchanting, depending on your point of view.

A few blocks away from the center lie the soon to be gone remnants of a less-rarified scene. Down past Kent Avenue, onto the crumbling cobblestones towards the ventilation unit for the L train running below, then to the right through a hole in the fence. Rotting piers, dog walkers, and solitary lurkers sitting impassively in their cars. Until not too long ago a black homeless man with two vicious dogs who called himself Satan pimped his crack whores to Hasidic Jews cruising by in their station wagons. He doesn't seem to be around anymore—nevertheless, the ambience differs markedly from your local mall.

Once you got past the fence you walked up a board onto a huge cement slab bigger than a football field where the sounds of rolling wheels could be heard. Started in the fall of 2000 by Jerry Lange and his cohorts, then helped along by the manual labor and design contributions of Rick Charnoski and others who go unnamed but are not forgotten, Skankytown was constructed to combat New York City's chronic lack of transitions. It started with a volcano-shaped obstacle that resembled Richard Dreyfus' potato sculpture in *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*. After that came a flat bar, some little wooden ollie ramps, a file cabinet turned on its side, and finally a five-foot high quarterpipe. Taking the Burnside and FDR initiative to heart, the bricks laying around were





Suski blunts frontside on the brink of extinction. We had just gone to press, but the analogies are obvious... Long live New York.

put to use as foundations and with the help of the concrete guys down the street and a lot of hard work, the spot came into existence. The results weren't remotely epic but that didn't really matter. You work with what's available.

Its beauty lay in the simplicity of it all and how determinedly not-easy to skate it was. There were cracks in the slab, cement bits strewn about, and pieces of broken glass to avoid. The volcano was always chipping away where it met the flat ground and I don't think even the builders expected the quarterpipe to be as gnarly as it turned out. For

all three were appreciated equally. There was a feeling of inclusion, a "Hey what's up?" familiarity that knew no borders. All of this with a breeze off the river and dusk's orange light coming between the skyscrapers of the most spectacular man-made view on the planet.

The impromptu skatepark was the reason to go there, but it was the atmosphere that made it really special. It was an antidote to the sterility and organization of society in general, a place to get away from rules and order. The reports of people getting arrested and impending

"EASY COME, EASY GO; AFTER THAT IT WILL BE JUST A POPULAR MEMORY."

something a little over waist high it had a minimum of transition and a maximum of vertical; it was like riding the tight shallow end of a backyard pool that had a textured, bumpy lip instead of coping. Just to grind it was an accomplishment.

An array of characters came out of the woodwork, from diehard heads and tech dogs kickflipping halfway up the volcano to oldsters riding boards of late-'80s vintage and little Polish kids pushing around. The diversity somehow gave birth to an ad-hoc sense of community that was probably tied to the self-invented nature of the place. There wasn't a feeling of competitiveness or exclusivity. Everyone was welcome. Bobby Puleo backside ollieing on the quarter pipe or Tino Razo launching an air over the volcano would be followed by an old-schooler doing a whiplash slash grind, and

doom created an ephemeral quality that made you savor the moment. Added to that was the ebb and flow of humanity's splendor in all its varied guises. The punk rock marching band practicing in the distance, pretty girls walking their dogs, old men curiously watching, kids doing their homework, Puerto Rican teenagers smoking pot, and Japanese tourists with their video cameras. One particularly memorable visitor was a guy on a bike trying to sell stolen CDs who went on to discuss about the pros and cons of the PBS series *The Antiques Roadshow*.

Life flowed by. Somebody did a cess-slide while a kickflip lipslide went down on the flat bar. You skated or hung out and drank a beer watching people ride around and admiring the vista behind them. It started to get dark and you knew this time might be the last. The next day it was gone and you had to remember what The Fly said.