

Later Skater: The Ramp to Lot 11

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Home is subjective; its meaning or connotation varies by person. For some, home is a house in suburbia with a white picket fence and a golden retriever. For others, home is wherever they can go to pursue their passions, even if it is an urban mountain range of skate ramps and rails beneath the Miami metro. Home knows no singular definition; however, Miami-based nonprofit Skatefree took an idle parking lot and made it into Lot 11—home to the Miami skateboarding community.

"I think that when I grew up in Miami," said Skatefree's president Nick Katz, "there was a loss of hope for good skateparks paired with a ton of apathy from the government." The professional skateboarder, who also owns Andrew Skate Shop in downtown Miami, recalls the couple of skateparks that were janky and pailing compared to state-of-the-art facilities he saw in magazines. "I didn't reach my full potential as a skater because I did not have the same skateparks growing up that kids in California or New York had."

"After living in Miami for a few years," said Skatefree founder Danny Fuenzalida, "there was a complete void of people willing to push the City of Miami for a good skatepark."

"At the time, skateparks were an afterthought; they were just a new amenity that the city could add to its public parks," said Katz of Miami's former skateboarding void.

One of only four professional skaters in the area, Fuenzalida felt obliged to fill the void within the Miami skateboarding community. Growing up in Chile, Fuenzalida dreamed of building skateparks where he grew up. The professional skateboarder said he took his dream when he moved to Miami.

"When I went to the city about it, they said they had always supported the idea of building skateparks, but the skating community was not organized enough," said Fuenzalida of his first steps towards Lot 11. "The city told me that there was never a concrete plan when they would take steps towards building skateparks."

"Relying on the city was not going to get me my dream skatepark," said Fuenzalida. The skateboarding education advocate says he remembers the city of Miami told him to start an organization so skateboarding could assemble a plan towards building a skatepark. Thus, in 2012, Skatefree was born to harness private ownership to create a public amenity. At the nonprofit's core was Fuenzalida's childhood dream of building and managing free public skateparks.

"I first decided to take on this burden at Grand Central Park," said Katz of his initial steps to build a skatepark independently. "I was relentlessly pursuant to this dream of bringing to fruition a skateboarding facility that I did not grow up with." Katz, who managed to get benches donated to the 20,000 sqft skatepark in downtown Miami, met Fuenzalida while working to build Grand Central Park.

"I was working on Grand Central Park as an experiment to see if brands would collaborate with me for events," said Fuenzalida. Impressed by Katz's commitment to building a state-of-the-art skateboard park in Miami, Fuenzalida asked Katz to join Skatefree.

"Things worked out in a beautiful way; I was really lucky with how things worked out," said Fuenzalida. Skatefree partnered with MPA and was lucky when they donated a parking lot underneath a bridge. Over nine development years, Katz and Fuenzalida created a skatepark with state-of-the-art facilities, becoming a hub for beginners and professionals alike.

"Lot 11 showed that we can take an old dusty parking lot under I-95 and turn it into something the best skatepark in Miami," said Katz. "We turned it into something useful for the community."

Katz says he sees kids at Lot 11 daily, assuming they probably spend more time at his Skatepark than at home or school. "I want Lot 11 to be a meeting ground for kids, where they meet the friends that change their lives. I hope that when kids come to Lot 11, they feel as if it's their home," said Katz.

"Lot 11 is so convenient because it is close to everyone, whether North, South, East, or West," said Polly Mercenari, a first-year majoring in media management. "When I go there, I see a little bit of everything— from little kids learning to skate to older people shooting professional videos and everything in between."

Mercenary, who says he grew up very interested in skateboarding, began going to Lot 11 with his father at 12 to meet people and learn to skateboard. "I'm not that into skateboarding anymore, but Lot 11 is still important to me and contributes a lot to the community," said Mercenari.

Mercenari says he still attends Lot 11, only now he attends the monthly flea market. "They got a little bit of everything—people selling food, custom-made clothes, and jewelry. I've even seen them doing piercings and tattoos," said Mercenari of the market.

The markets, which occur on the third Sunday of every month, allow small local businesses to sell various products— from food to custom-made clothes and jewelry.

"It's really fun to walk around and check stuff out, especially the vintage and thrifted clothes," said Mercenari, who enjoys bringing friends along with him.

"Programming has become a really big part of our brand story and give back to the Miami community," said Katz. "Our goal is to bring new experiences to the Miami skate community that have never existed before." By creating the programming that has become a prominent part of Skatefree's brand story, Katz says he feels lucky to flex his creative muscle and work with partners on unique free events.

"Throughout the process of building Lot 1, Virgil Abloh always pushed positive energy my way about how important Lot 11 would be," said Katz. "He really connected with the space and vision."

After Ahblo's sudden passing in Nov. 2021, Katz said he and Fuenzalida felt it necessary to honor his contributions to skateboarding and partnered with Nike to create the Virgil Abloh Foundation.

"My last correspondence with Virgil before he passed away was about doing some skate contest at Lot 11," said Katz, recalling how even after Abloh's career took off, he still checked in on Lot 11's development. "I remember him telling me he thought it would be dope to do a skate event at the park during Art Basel weekend; he even offered to put up all the money and fund it to make a vibe."

On Dec. 5, just over a year after Abloh passed, Lot 11 hosted its first annual Abloh Skateboarding Invitational on Art Basel weekend. Many coveted names within the skateboarding community were in attendance, including Paul Rodriguez, Ishod Wair, and Sean Malto.

"The city came out in droves for the Abloh Invitational, and I was really proud of it," said Katz. "I am really excited to see it happen again this year," Katz said that the event will include a day of skateboarding clinics for kids and giveaways for the community.

Of the events Lot 11 has hosted since opening in 2019, Katz says his favorite was the Andrew Music Club. In collaboration with his good friend David Sinopoli, who founded the Three Points Music Festival and owns Club Space, Katz planned a unique, underground music experience with affordable ticket prices. Andrew Skate Shop, the Three Points Music Festival, and Club

Space joined forces to give the Miami community a music experience different from what it was used to.

"We did a large-scale campaign with Spotify to curate a playlist what music represented the Miami skateboarding scene," said Katz of Lot 11's other endeavors. Katz says the Skate Noise campaign culminated in a live band performance from the Jacuzzi Boys on Jun. 30, 2023.

"Having performers at Lot 11 brings a one-of-a-kind ticked music experience to Lot 11," said Katz. "It makes it a venue that can be more malleable and give people a great experience with their friends."

"I saw my two friends' DJ performance for an event for skaters and techno listeners last month at Lot 11," said Gaelle Charlet, a junior double majoring in computer science and interactive media. "I knew most of the DJs, and everyone there was super friendly."

While Charlet says she does not skate, only there to support the music and DJs, she says she spotted skateboard regulars who appeared to know already the park set skateboarding throughout the event.

"Lot 11 can be used as a Litmus test for what can be done with these parking lots underneath the metro," said Nick Katz. The Andrew Skateshop owner hopes to build facilities for other sports undeath highways someday. "These places don't have to be parking lots; they can be wonderful

places where people enjoy spending their time," said Katz, aiming to build a robust and extrapolated system of parks.

Lot 11 is more than just a skatepark; it is a hub of arts and culture that is the product of years of pursuit and a passion ignited in the childhoods of Fuenzalida and Katz. Together, they created a home for the next generation of skateboarders, filling the void within the skateboarding community they felt in their youth.