

# 'A wild triple-decker sandwich': world's first multistorey skatepark lands in Folkestone

[Oliver Wainwright](#)

'A gamechanger' ... a skater enjoys a bowl at F51. Photograph: Matt Rowe

A great aluminium ark has landed in the centre of Folkestone, like some futuristic container ship run aground. Its steeply sloping sides are covered with a skin of crushed metal mesh that wraps the hulking vessel from blank stern to flaring prow, punctuated only by a few triangular windows. There's no hint of what it might contain – until you get closer and see big bowl-like shapes bulging down from the ceiling and bursting into the glass facade above the

entrance. Step inside and you find yourself beneath a billowing cloud of concrete that ripples and swells with the unmistakable undulations of a skatepark, as the sound of speeding wheels rattles overhead.

“We were originally asked to design a multistorey car park,” says Guy Hollaway, architect of [F51](#), as this gleaming arrival to the Kent seaside town is known. “But when a nearby skatepark had to be relocated we were asked to incorporate it into the design. The client increasingly thought the cars looked boring, so we got rid of them and made the world’s first multistorey skatepark instead.

The client in question is Sir Roger de Haan, a local businessman and philanthropist who sold the Saga holidays empire for £1.3bn in 2004, and [has since pumped millions into the regeneration of Folkestone](#). His charitable trust has funded the construction of an academy school and a sports centre, set up numerous galleries and studios, and transformed the harbour with a new promenade.



Unlike anything else on the planet ... F51. Photograph: Matt Rowe

Having sprinkled the town with munificent regenerative fairy dust, and cemented the place as a cultural capital with the Folkestone Triennial, De Haan has now embarked on [a vast development of luxury flats on the beachfront](#). Currently rising from the sands, the 1,000-home project, 8% of which will be affordable, has polarised the town. Some see it as welcome further investment, others as naked property speculation aimed at out-of-town buyers.

“He’s doing the opposite to most developers,” says Hollaway, “investing a huge amount in the community before building the flats, rather than doing it as a token gesture afterwards.” F51 is certainly far beyond what any developer would normally cough up: a £17m “adrenaline building”, gifted to the town.

The phrase world-first is overused, but there really is nothing quite like this anywhere else on the planet. It is a wild triple-decker sandwich of kickflips and ollies, along with the tallest indoor climbing wall in, well, south-east Britain, all floating above a boxing gym and cafe. [The drawings for the building](#) look like something from an improbable student project: climbers scale

Slip-sliding away ... the sweeping curves of the bowl park. Photograph: Matte Rowe

one side of the structure, as skateboarders leap past them, pumping between mounds and quarter pipes, while a boxing match is in full swing down below, beneath the rippling rack of floors.

There are continual views between the different parts of the building, which expands outwards as it rises, forming a dynamic sense of a place buzzing and bursting out at the seams. In the view of [Iain Borden, architectural historian and author of Skateboarding and the City](#), it's a gamechanger, "as startling and shocking as the [1955 Citroën DS](#) was for

automobile design, and as cohesive and timely as the [2007 iPhone](#) was for smartphones”.

The three different levels cater to all ages and abilities, ranging from shallow ramps for beginners to concrete bowls deep enough to keep even the most fearless Olympians entertained. The more gentle flow park at the top of the building is a seamless wooden world, conceived with skaters, scooters and BMXers in mind. It is dotted with mounds (or “pump bumps”) and volcanoes, where the floor rises to merge into the building’s hefty concrete columns, while a “vert” ramp launches riders up seemingly within reach of the orange steel beams that shoot across the ceiling, five metres overhead.

The middle floor houses a “street park”, which is equipped with features that recall the urban landscape, with steps, rails and ledges to slide and grind across – also made of plywood to allow the park to be easily updated as skating evolves. Made by [specialists Cambian](#), the wooden floors have been crafted like fine cabinetry, each piece of the complex jigsaw cut in their Sussex factory then hand-finished on site. Cutouts on both levels provide vertiginous views of the climbing wall, designed as a three-sided crevasse, with plenty of overhangs and an Olympic spec speedwall, with big red buttons to time your ascent.

**We wanted to emulate the origins of bowl-skating in Dogtown**

Finally, the first floor is home to the spectacular bowl park, a sculptural symphony of polished

concrete that plunges and swells in heart-stopping swoops, as if commanded by the late Zaha Hadid. On one side is what's known as a capsule bowl, along with skateable columns where the floor curves up between two massive pillars. These are a nod to the famous [Burnside DIY skatepark](#) in Portland, Oregon, built by a group of skateboarders beneath a bridge in the 1990s, that has since become a touchstone for such makeshift skateparks around the world. In a similar vein, there's a pool, complete with a frieze of swimming pool tiles and specialist stone coping, inspired by the empty swimming pools in California where skateboarding started out.

“We wanted to emulate the origins of bowl-skating in Dogtown,” says Hollaway, referring to the nickname for Santa Monica in the 1970s, where skateboarders began testing their skills in pools that had been drained due to drought. F51's pool features vertical sides and a double waterfall, as the transition between levels is called, plunging to almost three metres at the deep end. “It's a legit pool that will challenge even the most expert of riders,” says Borden.

Dizzying ... the indoor climbing wall. Photograph: Matt Rowe/F51

The work of [specialist skatepark firm Maverick](#), which is more used to casting its concrete landscapes straight into the ground, the bowl floor was made all the more complex by having to be suspended in midair. A primary concrete slab was first cast into carved polystyrene moulds, to create the visible bulging underside, with a secondary layer of concrete sprayed on top, hand-trowelled to a smooth finish with the care of icing a cake.

Begun in 2015, and delayed for several years by technical difficulties and Covid, the opening of the project is well timed to catch [the recent boom in skateboarding](#). The pandemic saw the biggest increase since 2000, when the release of the Tony Hawk Pro Skater game sparked new interest, and

skateboard sales rose by more than 30% last year. There are now 1,650 outdoor parks across the UK and 65 indoor ones, according to Skateboard GB, the new national governing body established since skateboarding became an Olympic sport for Tokyo 2020 – an event that saw a further spike for the sport, [particularly among girls](#), after 13-year-old Sky Brown scooped a bronze for Britain.

“We’re keen to counter the idea that if you don’t play team sports you’re not sporty,” says Dan Hulme of the Sports Trust, the branch of De Haan’s charitable foundation charged with running F51. Their coaching programme with local schools will run skateboarding classes as well as workshops covering graphic design, videography and skatepark design. “It provides a pathway into so many different areas,” he says.





It's a markedly different approach to when skating fever first swept the UK in the 1970s, spawning several commercial indoor skateparks that turned out to be expensive failures. In 1978, two major London parks opened: [Rolling Thunder](#) in Brentford, which had an astonishing concrete landscape cast inside a former market hall; and [Mad Dog Bowl](#), the biggest such skatepark in Europe at the time, housed in the former Astoria cinema on the Old Kent Road.

"They were amazing places," says Borden, who began skating as a 15-year-old in 1977. "But they got their timing and attitude completely wrong. The skateboarding boom was already fading away by the time they opened, and they were run like golf clubs, with expensive membership fees and officious management, so most closed by the 1980s."

By contrast, F51 will offer £1 monthly after-school membership to local kids, with skateboarding planned to be actively built into the curriculum of the academy school. "Skateparks are so often in dingy out-of-town locations," says Hollaway. "We wanted this to be a beacon right in the centre, saying to young people, 'You're the most important customer in town – because you are the future.'"