

Self and the City: Parkour, Architecture, and the Interstices of the 'Knowable' City

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Architecture's presence in the city acts as a mediator through which the always already historical and social contexts are articulated. Architecture can influence our ability to give a comprehensive account of ourselves in the city. Our knowledge of self, our subjectification, is intertwined in the social conditions of our emergence. In effect, we make choices about which practices, or social actions, to enact based on their commensurability with regulatory norms. In many ways our everyday performances are explicitly tied to the presence of architecture. The purpose of this paper is to explore architecture's participation in the maintenance of hegemonic discourses circumscribing appropriate uses of city space. To understand the effects of architecture on lived experiences I utilize the art of parkour as both a unit of analysis and as a method of investigation. Parkour's engagement with architecture opens up a new understanding of the city. The data for this study came from several months of my regular participation in the parkour community in the downtown area of Indianapolis, Indiana. Therefore, I was embedded as much as possible in my field site interacting with other traceurs, conducting interviews, and being an active observing participant. To interpret and analyze the potential of parkour I take the position of the critical ethnographer. The purpose is to investigate how traceurs uncover new ways of understanding themselves, not only in relation to, but also in conjunction with, the architecture of the city. Through parkour, the self then finds its expression in the interstices of the knowable city.

Keywords: parkour, architecture, body, city, discourse

10:00 am, Saturday, 30 June 2012, 400 Block of Massachusetts Avenue, Indianapolis, IN

It had been just over 5 years since I lived on The Avenue. Having developed as a traceur for around 2 of those years, and being from Indianapolis, I wanted to go back

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to my old neighborhood to practice parkour. I traveled to a parking garage located on the northwest corner of the 400 block of Massachusetts and Michigan Street. The structure is an eight-story monolith style building constructed of exposed concrete—what architects refer to as the brutalist style. The access ramp is a walkway leading up and through the structure and is closed to the outside but is open to the parking decks inside. The walkway is approximately four feet wide with painted blue railings on either side. The ramp provides access to each parking level in a switchback or zigzag pattern. Along the switchback is a two-foot gap between the parallel concrete barriers that mark the ramp and the parking levels. Although not its intended design, it was evident the gap was mainly used to dispose of waste of all kinds.

I started by side vaulting onto the diagonal barrier enclosing the ramp. From there I ran along the wall similar to a gymnast on a balance beam. Once I came to the start of the next switchback I jumped and grabbed the top of the next wall and climbed up. The exposed concrete was excellent for gripping the walls. It had deep ridges and jagged edges from the pebbles mixed in the concrete. It was cold and felt wet even though it was dry. The grooves in the concrete also provided much needed traction for my feet to push off and give me the momentum to get up and over to the top of the wall. Once on top of the next switchback I decided to jump the four-foot gap between the ramp wall and the parking deck. I planted both feet and jumped the gap. I landed using my hands to grab the top of the parking deck wall and swung my feet directly to the blue handrail. Executing a wall run I climbed to the top. I then ran up the diagonal switchback and repeated the series of moves to complete a parkour run up several floors.

I made my way to the roof and looked over Mass Ave. From the vantage point atop the parking garage I could see most of The Avenue. Mass Ave is billed as a center for arts and culture in Indianapolis, but the question still remains, for whom? The residents on The Avenue come from myriad backgrounds as mixed-income apartments and condominiums populate the district; however, the majority of the people who use the space are largely the White middle class. They come to The Avenue for the entertainment, bars, restaurants, and art galleries.

Until recently the area surrounding Mass Ave is visibly neglected. The apartment buildings and businesses on the adjacent streets of Michigan and Alabama are dilapidated, full of litter, and have obviously not been maintained over the years. These residences and businesses are located within the politically demarcated space of the Arts and Cultural district, yet, have had little or no resources devoted to their renovation. Mass Ave is on a 45-degree angle from the perpendicular Cartesian street grid of Indianapolis. The marketing campaign for Mass Ave advertises the area as *45 degrees from the ordinary*. This advertising strategy has a sense of irony as The Avenue's development stands in stark contrast to the surrounding area.

What is so revealing about The Avenue is that when analyzed through its history and economic development it tells a story—a spatial story. The spatial practices giving shape and meaning to Mass Ave produce a representation of power, which becomes encoded in the architecture. Individuals and their use of the space produce meanings

of the body, which become encoded in their spatial operations and movements. The raced, sexed, and classed bodies that have the economic means to patronize the businesses on The Avenue take on different meaning, as they become juxtaposed 45 degrees from the *ordinary*.



fig. 1: parking garage

This opening vignette illustrates how architecture can offer the discursive parameters in which the subject is enmeshed. These are, as Butler states, “presented as the available norms through which self-recognition can take place” (“Giving an Account” 22). Architecture’s presence in the city acts as a mediator through which the always already historical and social contexts are articulated. For example, as Butler explains, “there is no ‘I’ that can fully stand apart from the social conditions of its emergence” (“Giving an Account” 7). Thus, architecture can influence our ability to give a comprehensive account of ourselves in the city. Our knowledge of self, our subjectification, is intertwined in the social conditions of our emergence. In effect, we make choices about which practices, or social actions, to enact based on their commensurability with regulatory norms. Therefore, in many ways, our everyday

performances are explicitly tied to the presence of architecture. Parkour's engagement with architecture opens up a new understanding of the self in the city. It provides practitioners opportunities to explore and uncover experiences lying dormant under the layers of discourse. Through parkour, the self then finds its expression in the interstices of the knowable city.

This article explores architecture's participation in the maintenance of hegemonic discourses circumscribing appropriate uses of city space. The interlocking discourses that render urban space intelligible further render legible the social relations and expectations for spatial practice. Such discourses are codified and symbolized in architecture. Architecture facilitates, or enacts, the power of discourse to circumscribe a range of acceptable practices in urban space. Thus, architecture acts citationally to, in part, give discourse the power to influence spatial operations. As a regulatory force, architecture corrals practices of everyday life so that only certain spatial practices, whether subversive or reiterative, are intelligible, knowable, or even thinkable. Therefore, certain uses of the city remain hidden—relegated to what Butler calls, the “constitutive outside” (“Giving an Account” 188). To understand the effects of architecture on lived experiences I utilize the art of parkour as both a unit of analysis and as a method of investigation. The data for this study came from several months of my regular participation in the parkour community in the downtown area of Indianapolis, Indiana. During that time I immersed myself as much as possible in the parkour jams, a gathering of traceurs to practice parkour. I interacted with traceurs, talked to them, and actively participated in parkour with the community. To interpret and analyze the potential of parkour I take the position of the critical ethnographer. The purpose is to investigate how traceurs uncover new ways of understanding themselves, not only in relation to, but also in conjunction with, the architecture of the city.

Defining Parkour

Known as *l'art du déplacement* [the art of displacement], parkour is “focused on discovering original and creative ways to negotiate city spaces” (Bavinton 392). This method is centered on overcoming obstacles by executing a series of moves such as jumping, climbing, and vaulting in an effort to efficiently pass over, through, and around any obstacle found in one's environment. It is often described as finding the most efficient way to get from point A to point B without being stopped by anything in your path. The people who practice parkour are called traceurs. Traceurs take this idea of moving through your environment without being stopped by any obstacle and they apply certain moves like running, jumping, vaulting, and climbing. Each move and subsequent series of moves is executed in direct relation to the environment, the obstacle, and the chosen path. When enough fidelity is reached during the parkour run the traceur, in this transactional process between body and building, is able to flow fluidly with built space similar to a dance partner.

Parkour rejects “conventional routes and modes of access” (Fuggle, “Le Parkour” 159). Its appeal has been its ability to challenge conventional ways of understanding urban spaces, our relation to them, and how we negotiate understandings of self therein. As Atkinson describes parkour can offer its practitioner a challenge of dominant social constraints through “the use of urban gymnastics as social critique” (170). Traceurs inscribe “individual, subversive rhythms against the more collective uniform rhythms of everyday city life” (Fuggle, “Le Parkour” 159). This discipline is committed to changing the traceur’s experience of life by tapping into and bringing out the potential for the self through a realization of the potential of the body. As one traceur, Xander, told me: “it changes your take on the world...the more you do parkour the more it changes your perspective...the more it gives you energy.” Parkour’s focal point is from the inside out. Traceurs first seek individual change and transformation. “It has,” Par-ker (slightly changing the pronunciation of his last name to sound like parkour) explained, “even changed my diet...I started eating better and paying more attention to what I put in my body because of fuel.” They find potential for personal growth through opportunities found in connection with the environment. The traceur is something one becomes, as a developmental process in a way of life or becoming, and not a temporary performance of play or a momentary subversion. Change located at the level of the individual has important implications for understanding the body and the self within urban space. Danny described to me how parkour has changed her:

Well before I started doing it I was not physically fit at all. I was real skinny, skinny as a stick and it got me passed all my fears that I couldn’t do stuff. I never even thought about flipping or something like parkour but the stronger I got...it got me passed all that.

Foucault argues that the body is a strategic site and target of power (“Discipline and Punish”). As parkour offers a reinterpretation of the body this urban performance also challenges interpretations of the power that produces the meanings and discipline informing such interpretation. Parkour specifically engages this struggle at the site of the body and its connection to architecture.

Parkour was first associated with a type of military training developed by French naval officer Georges Hébert in the early 20th century as part of his *méthode naturelle* (natural method). Based off of Hébert’s natural method the *Parcours du Combattant*, which loosely translates to “running against” or “way of fighting,” made their appearance in the 1960s when the French developed obstacle courses to train soldiers during the U.S.’s war with Vietnam (Bavinton 392). Raymond Belle, born in Vietnam during the war, received an education and training from the French army (Fuggle, “Discourses of Subversion” 208). He practiced and experimented with the “efficient escape techniques” of the *Parcours du Combattant* in order to “improve his chances of survival during the war” (Witfeld, Gerling, and Pach 22). While living in France Raymond Belle embraced Hébert’s ideas of training the body and put these methods to work during his time as a firefighter. Belle became “proficient in *parcours* training

methods and promoted their virtues almost as passionately as Hébert” (Atkinson 172). The promotion of these virtues he passed on to his son, David.

David Belle, along with some of his childhood friends, including Sebastian Foucan (a key figure in the popularization of parkour) formed the group known as the Yamakazi. Belle and Foucan appropriated their own urban style of the natural method which they termed, parkour. Atkinson notes that Belle and Foucan’s “use of concrete and steel city spaces jibed well with Hébert’s philosophy of immersing oneself in one’s immediate physical/natural environment to gain a deep phenomenological awareness of it” (172). As the group fully immersed themselves in the urban environment the Yamakazi’s parkour in Lisses sparked public interest. During the late 1990s parkour participants began to grow alongside the attention it fostered from the media. Parkour’s popularity continues to proliferate as the many TV commercials, Hollywood movies, and YouTube videos utilize and celebrate parkour’s freedom of movement and the stylized images depicted by the media.

Parkour’s media exposure adds to its being audienceed by traceurs who watch each other to learn how to navigate the city but also by passersby who audience parkour which helps establish this cultural practice as a performance. As such, the performance of parkour fits Diana Taylor’s description of “embodied practice,” that “along with and bound up with cultural practices, offers a way of knowing” (2). Parkour is a struggle over knowledge about ways of being in the world and thus is a struggle in and of power. Throughout this study I am careful to not position parkour as pure subversion but as an enactment of power with the ability to expand the range of intelligibility for its practitioner. The goal for any analysis, Butler notes, cannot be pure subversion “as if an undermining were enough to establish and direct political struggle” (“Bodies that Matter” 240). She calls for researchers to think of ways to resignify power with power for an interarticulation of social relations. Parkour is not total subversion but a practice that resignifies power at the site of the body and architecture.

Parkour’s Body Of Scholarship

Scholars often position parkour as an emancipatory practice. Much of this argument views parkour in opposition to the everyday practices that allow capitalism to function in and define urban space. Parkour, scholars have shown, challenges the prerogative of the production-consumption binary, which constrains urban life and restricts usage counter to the interests of capital flow (Thompson 2008; Atkinson 2009; Mould 2009; Guss 2011). Still, others see parkour’s antagonism to capital through its reinterpretation of capital’s material-spatial productions. Michael Atkinson sums-up the anti-capital argument in suggesting parkour is “a political re-appropriation of commercial urban space” by “disrupting the order of technocapitalist space” (183). The practice of parkour, here, centers not on the production and consumption of commodities but on the counter production and consumption of space itself.

Further, scholars describe parkour as leisure and a type of creative play which reinterprets the built environment; one which is audienced and performed through a playful frame (Bavinton 2007; Geyh 2006; Higgins 2009). Others view parkour as a distinctly mobile and perceptual engagement of the environment. Fear itself can create a connectedness to space providing a “familiar link” to one’s environment (Saville 908). Much like the flâneur, for Atkinson, the traceur expresses disdain for “suffocatingly organized...and consumer-based cultural experiences and spaces” (179). Similarly, Scott Sharpe sees parkour as a form of less-confrontational resistance through the repetition of our habits. Reconnecting our arbitrary and often capricious habits to more purposeful action, scholars have shown parkour to be a subversive act which appropriates the body in conjunction with the sort of pre-defined experiences of, and ways of moving in, urban space (Atkinson 2009; Fuggle 2008a; Thompson 2008; Mould 2009; Daskalaki et al 2008). The feelings of freedom afforded by the practice of parkour, for many scholars, takes shape via parkour’s challenge to constraints in urban life.

Thus, a restriction to movement and its potential effects on a type of spatial freedom is a major point of contention in the parkour research. The traceur body, in and of space, is formed and transformed by architectural structures while simultaneously transforming space (see Fuggle 2008a). Ortuzar advances this point by arguing parkour reactivates the “dialectic relationship between structure and moving body” by reinterpreting restrictions to spatial movement (57). These studies provide an insightful body of scholarship to theoretically ground my study of parkour and its relationship with urban space.

I use the current research to frame my study but also as a point of departure. The important role of architecture in our lived urban experiences is understudied in the literature. Yet, and perhaps most notably, there is the need for more interaction not only with traceurs but also interaction as a traceur. Saville, Kidder, and Lamb offer valuable ethnographic accounts emerging from the interaction with traceurs and from their own participation in the parkour community. To understand how parkour’s interaction with the built environment influences traceurs’ negotiation of the self in the city, more insider knowledge is needed. More specifically, to fully understand how we as traceurs develop an alternative understanding of ourselves in relation to architectural space, our story needs to be told from our perspective.

Studying Parkour

I interpret and analyze the potential of parkour as a critical ethnographer. Critical ethnography lends itself well to the study of parkour. This approach is advantageous as it extends inquiry into critique to “describe, analyze and open to scrutiny otherwise hidden agendas, power centres and, assumptions that inhibit, repress and constrain” (Thomas 2). I ground my critical ethnography in what Gajjala and Altman refer to as “epistemologies of doing” (“Producing Cyber-selves”). Gajjala, Rybas, and Altman offer this method as an approach to critical ethnography centered on the experience

of doing and enact this approach to ethnography by challenging the binary discourses of online/offline interactions. There are essential components of this approach that are appropriate to the study of parkour.

Epistemologies of doing, Gajjala, Rybas, and Altman explain, is “an exploration of process through doing and being self-reflexive while doing ... [it requires] the subject/object to produce selves...also to continually interact and ‘live’ at these interfaces” (210). This learning-by-doing approach focuses on the researcher as participant in the production of knowledge and experience within the field of study. This method is imperative to obtaining an in-depth and situated knowledge in the art of parkour. The justification, then, for this method is because it is more difficult and more limiting to comprehend the transformative process traceurs undergo by simply observing this practice from an outsider’s perspective or by analyzing media coverage. An insider’s perspective offers a more nuanced and complicated assessment of parkour as a public performance.



fig. 2: our practice area

My empirical experience lends itself to insights about the practice of parkour and draws attention to how this personal journey influences ways traceurs understand themselves in relation to the city in and through ostensibly freer movement within

architectural space. My personal experiences, however, will not be the only resource for reporting and analyzing this cultural practice. My study is more collaborative and therefore includes an analysis of other experiences and perceptions shared by and with my fellow traceurs. In utilizing a participatory critical ethnography, conducting interviews with fellow traceurs helps to offset some of the limitations of a self-report and provides a more balanced understanding of traceurs' negotiation of self and the city.

This article emerges from field studies conducted between 2011 and 2012 of the parkour community in the downtown area of Indianapolis, Indiana. I attended and participated in, what the parkour community refers to as "jams." A jam, or jamming, is simply a gathering of people to practice parkour. The jams I attended were usually announced on Facebook and at the week's (sometimes month's) previous meeting. Attendance ranged from 15 to 20 traceurs on average. At times we saw upwards of 30 people at a single jam, although this was rare.

During our jams I took field notes during informal interviews and jotted notes about my in-the-moment reflections during participation. After the jams I conducted formal interviews with 17 of the regular traceurs. Experience levels varied from novice, only practicing parkour for a few weeks, to experienced, having practiced parkour for a year or more. Field notes and interviews were coded for themes and patterns. The parkour community of Indianapolis is predominately white, male, and performed by people in their late teens to mid-twenties; however, African-Americans, Asians, and Latinos regularly attended jams. Socio-economic background, too, was widely varied. Class distinction ranged from low-income neighborhoods on the west side, Emerson Avenue, to the very affluent north suburbs of Carmel. Following Kidder's ethnography of parkour in the Chicagoland, I gave traceur-participants the choice of using their real name or a pseudonym. Many traceurs develop a parkour-nickname and so most of the participants wanted to use their nicknames.

Architecture And The Knowable City

Architecture represents the interests and powers of constituencies and thus, their ideologies and values. The interests and intentions of those in power are materialized in the city's architecture. Architecture shows us where we fit in, where we do not, and signifies acceptable behavior. Architecture helps to normalize social relations because its very presence makes "it difficult to conceive of other arrangements of architectural spaces," which are simultaneously "social relations" (Geiryn 61). Our experiences and interpretations of city space "can become restricted to the extent that all other possibilities become excluded and architecture becomes a more negative form of social control" (Fuggle, "Le Parkour" 162). This works discursively because buildings conceal their makings and their purposes "through the discourses by which people customarily apprehend them" (Geiryn 61). In this way architecture helps to render the city legible, as it is a constant reminder of and referent to social relations and the hegemonic interests that organize the city. Architecture, then, acts in part to reinscribe

dominant discourses, which rationalize and normalize urban space. In doing so the built environment attempts to offer homogenous, generalizable lived experiences.

We learn cities by learning to navigate them. In many ways architecture invites, even disciplines, specific spatial activities or operations with regard to function and access. Developing this familiarity presents us with a certain freedom to explore alternative ways of being but a freedom constrained, conditioned, and made knowable by discursive limits of city space. As a medium through which disciplinary discourses flow, architecture participates in the production and maintenance of elite interests. It might be said that we are free to experience city life but within the confines inherent in the struggle and tension that is social life. Spatial movement and how we learn appropriate uses of space are an important concept in understanding lived experiences within the city. The freedom to move is as important as the power to discipline movement. Each exists within a discursive and continuous dialectic struggle that makes expected ways of being in the city, knowable.

Thus, the exclusionary nature of the materiality (physical presence) and discursive function (representation) of architecture operates pedagogically to develop an embodied knowledge of city space. The material arrangement of public space, specifically here the city's architecture, acts as a type of social mirror in which the individual is continuously "self-checking her or his identity against a building or boundary" (Borden 101). This, in turn, renders certain city spaces, and the appropriate behaviors therein, as knowable, normal, even virtuous. In her argument for the interdependence of understanding the self in relation to the physical environment, Leslie Weisman suggests, "we simply do not understand *who* we are until we know *where* we are" (9; emphasis mine). Therefore, how we understand ourselves in the city may not be dictated by, but is certainly connected to, architecture.

Self And The City

3:00 pm, Friday, 29 June 2012, Indianapolis, IN

We met behind the Eiteljorg Museum, the canal side, and greeted each other because there were some new faces. This time there were around fifteen of us plus two of the organizers, Cat and Moxy, who acted as coaches. We started to warm up with some squats followed by doing bear crawls. Just behind the staircase leading to the main rear entrance is a three-tiered retaining wall. The tiers increase in height ranging from around three feet to approximately five feet. After twenty minutes of warm up we started to work on wall grabs and wall runs. The varying heights of the wall made it perfect, and low risk, to practice these moves. While standing in line waiting for my turn to have a go at the wall I heard someone yell, "10 pushups!" I got down in the pushup position and starting doing repetitions on Moxy's count. Not knowing why the entire group had to suddenly drop down and give her 10 I whispered to the woman next to me, "why are we doing pushups?" She whispered back to me "we're not allowed to use the C word." "What's the C word," I asked. The group finished the

10 pushups and as we stood, still unable to bring herself to say the word, she whispered “we’re not allowed to say” and she spelled out “c-a-n-t.”

What is so telling about this interaction is how discourse informs knowledge of parkour and in turn informs knowledge as power. Simply telling someone the *C* word is not to be used has very little power discursively to constitute truth or knowledge about regulatory norms. The power of the discourse, and thus the norm, is brought to life by changing spatial practice. Disciplining the word out of the discourse through pushups repositions a discursively constructed truth. In other words *I can’t* is no longer knowable because the discourse has no viable reiterative performance. This is not to say the thinking-acting traceur simply forgets the discursive limitation of *I can’t* but rather parkour offers a discourse of possibility which she or he can reiterate to produce an expanded truth. Once incorporated into the group’s framework for thinking and acting it internalizes the discourse as it becomes part of how we come to relearn the self through the body in practicing parkour. Therefore, what was once circumscribed as knowable by normative discourse, inscribing a self-knowledge of *I can’t*, is reconceptualized through parkour as *I can*. This perception of possibility, of rethinking what you can be, as Brian, one of the more advanced traceurs told me, is because “parkour *is* possibility.” Further, he adds, “part of your development is learning how to get over your fears and jump from one thing to the next. It helped me overcome that fear and so I overcame part of myself that couldn’t do it or didn’t think it was possible.” The reiteration of *I can* furthers a discourse of parkour, through bodily performances, centered on possibility; a discourse which challenges the conscience and self-knowledge to which subjectivity is tethered.



fig. 3: the museum wall

Because discourse can never fully secure the borders of materiality and can never completely discipline uses of the body, movements counter to the discursive norm, such as parkour, find a certain freedom in the constitutive outside. Each performative act in parkour, for example, a cat leap over a stairwell, as well as the traceur's subjectivity, occurs within relations of discourse as power. The enactment of a traceur's power is an enactment of her or his agency. As Roland Bleiker points out, there is "no essence to human agency" but rather recognition of practices which produce the "complexities that are involved in a formulation of human agency" (209). Emirbayer and Mische provide a more detailed definition of agency describing it as:

A temporally embedded process of social engagement, informed by the past (in its habitual aspect), but also oriented toward the future (as a capacity to imagine alternative possibilities) and toward the present (as a capacity to contextualize past habits and future projects within the contingencies of the moment). (963)

The past, present, and future coalesce wherein the social actor then makes decisions of thought and action based on moments and contexts in an ongoing process. Agency is found in the complexities, perhaps web, of structures, schemas, and the constitutive practices of social life. Traceurs executing monkey vaults over architectural objects rearticulate but also challenge relations of power by exercising their freedom through acts of agency. As Butler comments, one is "in power even as one opposes it, formed by it as one reworks it" ("Bodies that Matter" 241). It is within "this simultaneity" wherein also exists "the condition for action itself" ("Bodies that Matter" 241). Traceurs are never outside of power as it defines both them and the conditions under which they act. Therefore, agency is central to parkour's ability to find occasions for action and the traceur's reworking of the power they challenge.

Through parkour, traceurs are able to imagine alternative possibilities in challenging disciplinary and constraining regulatory norms because agency can be "derived from the impossibility of choice" (Butler, "Bodies that Matter" 124). Traceurs exercise agency on the one hand as the discourse of the city creates limitations through regulatory norms while on the other these limitations create the conditions for action. In engaging these conditions for action traceurs challenge the discursive limits of the city for there exists possibilities outside, or in the interstices of, the regulatory laws of spatial modality. Therefore, in enacting a performance of parkour which is incommensurate with dominant discourse, the traceur's agency, and acts of freedom, are located in the "double-movement of being constituted in and by the signifier" of discourse (Butler, "Bodies that Matter" 220). In being formed by power even as one reworks it, traceurs continuously challenge the reiterative chains of discourse. The traceur's agency and enactment of freedom not only operates in the multiple and shifting dimensions of discourse but also offers a way to re-think the practitioner's relationship to the structure of urban life.

Rainmaker, one of the staples at the jams tells me, "parkour has really helped me develop as person, you know." He continues, "there's parts of the city I would've never wanted to go to, but I look at the city way different now. So like downtown

Indy, I feel like I could [parkour] run through anywhere and if anybody messed with me I'm good enough to get out of there" (Rainmaker). Leapster, one of Rainmaker's good friends, added, "take that patio up there for example." Two stories above where we were talking, just to the left of the retaining wall mentioned earlier, there is a patio for the museum's restaurant. Filled with tables and guarded by a thick railing, the main entrance for museum patrons is inside.

That thing is off limits to people, right? Or, I guess, people that didn't pay to get in, right. But how do we know that and why do we just not jump up there? So, like, parkour has really made me think about some of that stuff. Like, why don't I just go up there? What's stopping me? And doing parkour I could get up there easily, no problem, but that's not what its about. It's just that I could now. (Leapster)

Parkour's goal is not, nor could it ever be, total subversion but a way of achieving a personal freedom by engaging fluidly with what are constituted as impossible choices for action. Parkour acts explicitly within the fissures, or double movement, of discourse to challenge and rearticulate dominate ways of thinking and of disciplining spatial practice. It is an exercise of agency in as much as it works to inscribe the practitioner's power to use space but also to (re)codify the power relations which constitute the *normal* functioning and materiality of architectural space and the body.



fig. 4: the museum patio

Interaction with the built environment, in performances of self in the city, is nothing new. Other groups, too, engage architecture to explore, express, and to challenge dominant discourses of use concerning the body and the city. Groups such

as Urban Explorers, at times referred to as UE or Urbex, explore the city's forgotten spaces. Bradley Garrett calls this practice "place-hacking" (14). Urbexers, those who practice UE, are attracted to spaces that are behind the scenes such as alleys, culverts and railways (Mott & Roberts 2014). For UE, the main concern is infiltration and documentation. Many Urbexers liken this activity to trespassing. Urbexers infiltrate a city's abandoned places (e.g., storm drains or subway tunnels) with the purpose of exploring TOADS (Temporary, Obsolete, Abandoned and Derelict Spaces) (Paiva 9). For these explorers photography, and at times video, is central to the experience. To get a picture inside a chained-off tunnel or from the top of a construction crane is a major thrill, especially, if capture is dangerous with the added component of getting caught.

UE shares many of the values and connections to space with parkour. According to Ninjalicious, considered by many to be the founder of UE, UE is a "mind-expanding hobby that encourages our natural instincts to explore and play in our own environment" (Infiltration.org). Genuine urban explorers, he argues, "never vandalize, steal or damage anything" and have a real appreciation for their cities (Infiltration.org). So, in many ways Urbexers are similar to traceurs in playing with the environment and understanding themselves in relation to city's architecture. UE is admittedly a hobby, while traceurs devote their lives to parkour and achieving a mental and physical freeflow with any and all environments. This separates parkour from UE and even an endless variety of "get fit" claims such as the en vogue CrossFit craze or the increasingly popular Tough Mudder race series. Activities such as CrossFit or Tough Mudder are not only constituted by different philosophies and methodologies they are meant to support an overall balanced lifestyle and act more as a rhetorical proof of fitness within late modern capitalist values (see Lamb & Hillman, 2014). While UE explores the built environment, parkour flows with the rhythms of the city. An Urbexer might crawl into a storm drain to get a great photo, while the traceur would pass over it as she runs. The major difference, however, is that for the most devoted traceur, parkour is a discipline of the body and the mind. For the Urbexers, exploring the abandoned warehouse tends to be a hobby of finding out what is inside.

Agency And Empowerment

Through my own participation in these jams, I began to develop more as a traceur myself. I felt, in both body and mind, that parkour had a significant influence on how I looked at myself, at space, and even feeling empowered therein. Many of the traceurs I spoke with talked about parkour changing their fundamental approach to life. "[Parkour] made me realize that I can do anything.... after ten years of gymnastics I didn't think I could do anything to improve to get better personally but I feel like anything really is possible" (Danny). The notion of getting better personally is linked to a certain ownership in the expansion of self-knowledge derived from the practice of parkour. A more advanced traceur, Flip, comments: "I was always kind of

enamored by special forces [military] training. I wanted to do that. Parkour has changed the way I exercise and made me smarter doing my training...it's definitely expanded my view of what I am capable of." The feeling of empowerment, of being capable of more, results from the traceur being responsible for her or his training and development. As traceurs transform their body so too do they transform their attitudes toward ways of being.

Agency, then, is enacted through traceur's transformation of the body in and through the practice of parkour. As the subject is never complete, it in this process traceurs are able to imagine alternative possibilities in challenging disciplinary and constraining regulatory norms. As one of the coaches, Moxy, explains:

Parkour put a name on things I wanted to improve in myself. Stuff that I was nervous about or afraid of it helped me look at those differently and approach them differently. Like running up a wall, for example, it makes me think of mental obstacles too. It's helped me recognize those. Parkour gives a name to things I wanted to try or change in myself like getting over physical and mental barriers.

Parkour, for many, acts as a name for their agency. Agency can be derived from what are perceived as impossible or unknowable choices. Differently approaching, even recognizing, physical and mental barriers provides the occasion for action. Parkour offers practitioners a wider range of once-thought *impossible* choices. As power acts on the traceur's possible actions parkour reframes what actions are possible. Through a more disciplined body traceurs limit power's ability to constrain. The domain of intelligibility is expanded because of the traceur's expanded possibilities, not only in thought and action but also in expanded conceptions of what the self is or can be.

The training of parkour functions as meticulous work of power on the body. Traceurs employ techniques to master the body and enact agency. Thus, hegemonic power provides the occasion to act—disciplining spatial modalities—while parkour responds giving the traceur the techniques to use the body as an exercise of power. As Cat describes:

There's not a sense that something is an obstacle. It's not an obstacle it's an opportunity. My viewpoint has changed on the obstacles you find in your path because you say 'I have to stop or go another way.' But with parkour you use the obstacle as a tool. So buildings become part of you and you become part of them. You use the environment as a tool like that to see things differently and really even see yourself like that.

Through the practice of parkour obstacles become tools of agency. The building or barrier becomes an opportunity to enact agency. For the traceur the body, space, and agency have a reciprocal inherence.

For traceurs acts of agency, as acts of power, even freedom, are employed through an appropriation of both the body and space. The body, Lefebvre claims, "takes its revenge" on space in seeking "to make itself known" (384). The reciprocal inherence of agency, body, and space is located in traceurs making themselves known, or differently knowable, in space. Making the self knowable in space is accomplished

through appropriation of the body as the body is “generative...of practice, of use [and] hence of space” (Lefebvre 384). Therefore, an appropriation of the body is at once an appropriation of space. Combining practice, use, and space as opportunities and as tools for agency, traceurs use the corporeal connection of body and built form to enact freedom by generating new practices, uses, and hence new spaces.



fig. 5: the surrounding area

Parkour’s ability to generate alternative meanings of spaces through new practices is due to space and action being co-constitutive. New spatial practices produce space differently in the same way that new spaces encourage new practices. Many traceurs find the freedom to act in the development of the parkour vision. Bikes, a self-described “middle-of-the-roader” tells about the acquisition of the parkour vision. He says:

Doing this stuff has changed my experiences of even walking down the street. My outlook walking down the street like with architecture and buildings or whatever, if I hadn’t done parkour I would have just looked at it. I would have walked down the street and seen that wall and that rail and not thought to use them but now I have a different view of the architecture when I walk down the street. So like this fountain here on the side, I would, before, just not thought about it because you just look at and its pretty or whatever. But now, I’m like you can monkey [vault] that low part and I bet I could wall run that biggest part.

Parkour foregrounds the structure—its meaning and use—and allows the traceur to rethink her or his interaction with the built environment. Rethinking space can lead to

emancipatory reconceptualization of spatial practice. Par-ker speaks to this idea when he says, “I don’t see fences anymore. I see...I can do this! So like the fence is something I can get over so I see a tic tac or a way to monkey over it. I don’t see I can go through the gate, now I see how many ways I can get over [the gate].” By deploying energy in space, traceurs “produce space and themselves, along with their motions, according to the laws of space” (Lefebvre 171). Parkour could be defined as producing the self through motion and thus becomes emancipatory as space is produced through practice. Rethinking structures in space lends itself to new spatial practices and thus (re)produces space as more emancipatory and less constraining.

The appropriation of space, for Lefebvre, requires more than just vision as subjects are still limited by the “symmetries, interactions...and other determinants of space” (195). There are material symmetries and determinants, for instance, the physicality of architecture and the organization of space. Traceurs cannot walk through walls; however, they can vault over them. The laws of gravity, too, play a part in determining the traceur’s interaction with the built environment. Traceurs cannot fly between buildings or over them; however, they can tic tac and climb to the roof or jump from one building to the next. As Cat tells me, “certain movements, like parkour, are not real conducive or acceptable really. It’s because we’re so preconditioned to commute from place to place in a certain way.” Through the parkour flow the practitioner challenges discursive symmetries, interactions, and determinates which precondition individuals’ use of space: a precondition that constrains and informs the self-knowledge of subjectivity.

In challenging power through the body Lefebvre calls for the mastery not only of space through appropriation but also in individuals’ taking “control of their own nature” (166). Alex, one of the newer traceurs to the group and to the practice of parkour describes her feeling of this mastery in her continued progression as a traceur. She explains:

Parkour has definitely opened new doors, literally. It’s given me a really great appreciation of more people and like where I am. I definitely feel way more in control of my body now. I see stuff way different now. Not only like the world but like myself too. I can do a lot more stuff now because I’m so confident in *the way*, you know, parkour allows me to accomplish that. (emphasis mine)

The way she speaks of is how many traceurs describe their personal journey and finding their flow. Achieving fluid motion with the environment, for traceurs, is the ultimate mastery of self and space.

Traceurs find this development particularly emancipating. Bikes’ friend, Chester, told me about his feelings of a more emancipated experience of self in the city. Chester comments:

I feel like there are no restrictions now on what I can and can’t do in my environment. There’s a larger sense of freedom. Gates and walls are total barriers and there’s no way to get over them. But with parkour restrictions like that are no longer obstacles.

The feelings of empowerment acquired through the practice of parkour provide another traceur a sense of agency, as he reveals: “there’s a feeling of the biggest badassness in the world. I mean, you start seeing things to monkey over or just get over. You start feeling like you can do anything” (Jackson). Jackson’s comments reflect how the reciprocal inherence of architecture, spatial practice, and expanding our expressions of self therein lies in the processes of human activity, always relational, which “fashion space and are determined by it” (Lefebvre 85). Parkour expands how we know ourselves in the city by explicitly operating within the fissures of discourse to challenge and rearticulate spatial practices: practices which continuously (re)produce the self and the city.

Conclusion: Leaping Forward

Traceurs utilize the practice of parkour to reconstitute their experience of the world, or the experience prescribed by social life. As the body is of space so too are the practices that produce space. A change in the body, then, has the potential to change the production of space and therefore the body-space dialectic that informs ways of being. Yet, parkour may not be for everyone. There are myriad engagements of urban performances centered on emancipatory appropriation of space. For example, dance, skateboarding, buildering, and urban exploration all exist as embodied practices which offer freer expressions of self and experiences of city space. As architecture is produced by social processes, it is also a reflection of that society’s values and relations of power. In continuing to analyze the reciprocal inherence of our bodies and our environments we can continue to appropriate spaces which resist hegemonic normative structures and center them more on emancipatory, participatory, and inclusive productions of space.

Parkour’s rethinking of the relationship between architecture and the body offers an expansion of Hébert’s maxim centering on being strong to be useful. Through the practice of parkour, to be strong can be thought of as being empowered. Parkour does not limit the notion of strength to only physical strength. Parkour also develops one’s mental awareness so that the notion of strength includes a greater capacity to *see* the limiting effects of hegemonic discourses. Thus, the notion of being useful can also be rethought through the lens of parkour. As demonstrated by the traceurs in this study parkour gives a greater sense of personal connection not only to space but also to others. Parkour encourages appropriation of spaces toward more accepting, inclusive, and communal uses. In this way, traceurs disrupt normative conceptions of both themselves and architecture as they explore new considerations of their bodies and the complacency in the order of things.

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