

**The “Slant Wall”, the Traceur and the Space In-between:
Warped Spaces of the Everyday at Caltrans District 7 Headquarters**

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Abstract

The building skin is a protective barrier against elements, a container of internal functions, and a performative surface in terms of materiality, decoration and expression. Each of these three performative identifiers of the building’s skin are either incorporated with intention by architects and designers; or after the fact by taggers, skateboarders and traceurs. This paper will focus on traceurs and the space of their interactions with their built environment. A brief background on parkour and free-running must be provided first, and their differences distinguished, as well a clarification on why I will use the term ‘traceur’ as opposed to ‘free-runner’.

Background

Founded by David Belle, Parkour (PK) focuses on practicing efficient movements with a purpose, mainly to develop one’s body and mind to be able to overcome obstacles in case of an emergency. The term parkour derives from *parcours du combattant*, the classic obstacle course method of military training proposed by Georges Hébert.¹ Parkour practitioners are referred to as traceurs, or traceuses for females. Free-running carries the same concept of physical agility and efficiency as parkour, but is often described as ‘showy’ for heavy use of acrobatics. Unlike parkour which is purpose driven—take the most direct path of travel as quick as possible—free-running is movement driven²: ‘what can I do here?’ or, ‘what do I feel like doing here?’ Therefore free-running has become a competitive sport showing off the free-runners movements

through an environment, whereas parkour is a non-competitive activity with an itinerary. Parkour does require a certain level of acrobatics to make many movements possible, so there is a fine line between the two where parkour can become free-running, but free-running cannot be parkour.

Observation

Over the course of two weekends, I photographed a group of young men between 14 and 24. They are members of the Los Angeles Parkour Meetup group (LAPK), a group of enthusiasts who have found community in their common interest of parkour training. Their skills vary and only the two "leaders", as they call the two founding members of the group have trained in gymnastics since childhood. Though they refer to themselves as traceurs—practitioners of parkour—their attitude and way of thinking about their moves is more playful. This could be due to the fact that other than the "leaders", the rest of the group's members are beginners. They explicitly ask, "What can I do here?"—the free-runner's movement-driven question—as opposed to "How do I get from here to there?"—the traceur's purpose-driven question. I will not be critiquing their labeling of themselves and their activity as it is not the concern of my paper, and will instead respect their youthful pride and continue to use the words 'parkour' and 'traceur' even though 'free-running' is more appropriate.

While photographing, I listened to their unprovoked conversations and occasionally probed them to find answers to my questions. A favourite comment was: "Skateboarders get kicked out wherever they show up. That's why they end up in nasty-ass places like this (referring to an abandoned rooftop in Lincoln Heights). We never get caught; they (the police) don't know what we're doing." As a matter of fact,

skateboarders drop their boards and watch these guys. An activity that was once an act of ultimate defiance, of "sticking it to the man" and waxing their pristine marble ledges and grinding them down with skates, suddenly is not cool once it has been defined and confined—in their own terms "they have to go to skate parks." This comment places itself in opposition to Iain Borden's observations of skaters in skate parks and how their command of time, space and speed, as well as the complexity of their moves and techniques has further developed in the skate park.³ Quoting Lefebvre, Borden brings to attention that it is "through revolt against normative spaces of representation that there is the prospect of recovering the world of differences—the natural, the sensory/sensual, sexuality and pleasure."⁴ However, with the construction of skate parks, the element of "revolt" is pulled from the equation, leaving no room for discovery of differences as the activity is now taking place outside of normative spaces and away from normative behaviours needed to compare for differences.

Rather than being an evolution of skateboarding, parkour begins at the point which skateboarding originated from, which was an appropriation of time and space. However, the primary attitude behind each is what sets these activities apart: parkour, as defined earlier is purpose driven, the purpose being avoiding obstacles, skateboarding is a "pleasure driven"⁵ activity, and pleasure does not necessarily need a purpose. So how does space and its appropriation differ for these groups than for the rest of us, myself for example, giddy over the experience of climbing a fence, a wall and jumping off a rooftop for the very first time? Borden provides a thorough study on skateboarders, so I will not delve into skateboarding and will only focus on what space and the city can possibly mean to the traceur.

Analysis

In *Social Formation and Symbolic Landscape*, Denis Cosgrove, very simply put, asks how can one argue for meaning for something which is ephemeral, referring to Renaissance Venice and the importance they placed on the city as a landscape and backdrop for example, for theatre, a temporal activity. Drawing on cartography and painting, specifically landscape painting, he demonstrates that during the Renaissance many Europeans came to see the "external world and nature in novel ways, ways that corresponded to new approaches to production on the land." In the same manner, traceurs, through an imagined cartography have come to see their environment, the cityscape, in new ways that correspond to new approaches in the production of everyday space. This new way of seeing the cityscape stems from a new realization of the body's placement in the environment. To quote Jo, the LA parkour group leader, "To the traceur, the environment is no longer just walls or something to look at, it becomes a place where one would think 'I wonder what I can do here.' What was once a cage or an obstacle suddenly becomes the thing that can help lift a person, allowing them to rise higher than what is normally possible."

What is normally possible is based on conventional perceptions of the placement of our body within our environment. In an *Environment and Behaviour* article titled Structures of Mental Spaces, Barbara Tversky identifies four distinct spaces in which the human body functions: 1. The space of the body, 2. The space around the body, 3. The space of navigation, and 4. The space of graphics.⁶ Tversky and her colleagues have conducted numerous experiments on these multiple modes that space exists and which our body interacts with. Specific to my focus on parkour, I am interested in the space around the body, which is the direct space around us, which we inhabit.

Tversky asserts that "that the space around the body—the space that can be readily perceived and acted on—is conceived of three-dimensionally from a reference frame based on extensions of the three major body axes, head/feet, front/back, and left/right."⁷ To paraphrase her, she concludes that the accessibility of objects in the space around the body depends on the perceptual and functional asymmetries of the body axes and on their relation to the axis of the world, formed by gravity.

The traceur has learned that the axes of their bodies are capable of shifting from the world axis of gravity, the main regulator of walking upright. This shift in axes from left-right and up-down to upper-left or lower-right and so forth opens up new modes of movement and interaction in the space surrounding their bodies. To realize we are not bound to expected modes of travel through space, or occupation of space is a liberating moment in our perception of our bodies and our environment.

"In a dérive one or more persons during a certain period drop their usual motives for movement and action, their relations, their work and leisure activities and let themselves be drawn by the terrain and the encounters they find there."⁸

—Guy Debord

The Situationists also discovered this liberation in breaking from the established norms and devised dérive, what Debord called in his historical text of 1958 'a technique of transient passage through varied ambiances'.⁹ Dérive was a way of creating unpredictable and spontaneous itineraries. Necessary to this drifting, and similar to the traceur's intentions of obstacle avoidance, was that the path of wandering was only

determined by the city and its attractions and counter-attractions rather than being pre-planned; the paths were dependent on chance and the drifter's impulses. In relation to *dérive*, the Situationists defined *détournement*, an act of reversal of the existing to create a new subversive effect. *Détournement*, therefore, was a Situationist 'tactic' against organized space. As Simon Sandler describes in his book, *The Situationist City*, these acts "release the ordinary citizen into a world of experiment, anarchy and play."¹⁰ Are traceurs familiar with these theories of re-appropriation and interaction? Absolutely not; however, they are actively creating situations where social rules and habituations brought on by the city's form and structure are dissolved¹¹. Their 'rapid' and successive movements through space create new experiences and 'organizations of space';¹² they deploy 'tactics' of disorganization upon striated spaces of the city, preparing for moments of future anarchy, while presently engaging in play.

Findings

*"Architecture with any authenticity represents resistance. Resistance is a good thing."*¹³

—Quoting Thom Mayne, from a New York Times article.

"They're by the slant walls." said David. "The 'slant walls'?" I ask, trying to visualize what he is referring to while walking away from "the holey sculpture." It is with no surprise that one of the buildings favoured by the Los Angeles traceurs is the Caltrans District 7 Headquarters designed by Morphosis. Where better to practice fluid methods of resistance—resistance to natural axes, to forces in-pursuit, and unwritten-yet-generally-accepted and enforced behaviours within the urban environment—than the defiant architect's "slant walls."

I found this building interesting in terms of the responsive 'skin' at the upper level of the building and the interactive 'skin' of the street level and how these two levels place the building as a flux between traceur and environment. This is not to be simplified in the way that every building holds this position of connection by means of, for example, heat retention or transfer. What prevents this over-simplification is the nature of the traceur's activities versus the axes-bound person's activities and the types of space they each produce on and around the building.

The axes-bound act within allowed areas of what Merleau-Ponty calls "geometrical space", the street and sidewalk, and behave accordingly within these spaces. The traceur's perception of their environment and the resultant movements within it extends "geometrical space" to "anthropologic space", space that is inhabited with the dynamics of human interaction. This extension creates a blurring of boundaries between the two spaces where the traceurs, warping and extending 'places', create an everyday space that is unperceivable by the axes-bound; they "ceaselessly transform places into spaces and spaces into places."¹⁴ The temporal spaces produced are analogous to the building where it is touched, moved, occupied and formed ceaselessly by one element (the wind). These spaces of interaction are in constant flux: one surface extends to become another as one element, the traceur, animates them in succession; the sidewalk extends to become the wall, not in materiality of the surface, but in temporality of the traveled space. These new warped everyday spaces represent "the potential for new social arrangements and forms of imagination."¹⁵

What is the purpose of this study on spaces evoked through non-standard movements of the traceur and the surface he navigates? How do the temporal everyday spaces

between horizontal and vertical urban surfaces play a greater role in architecture's interactions in social spaces? A *Wired* article by Andrew Blum asks a similar question in a slightly different way by looking at how the latest architectural "trends move toward folded planes that transition seamlessly from wall to ceiling and back to wall"¹⁶ and that in order to achieve functional spaces within these folds and surfaces architects have consulted with those who use these types of spaces: skateboarders. Zaha Hadid's Phaeno Science Center in Germany and the Oslo Opera House by Snøhetta provide two such examples where there is a conscious design move on behalf of the architects to include the skateboarders in the social spaces of their buildings. Not only have they designed to include these users, they have consulted them for effectively designing surfaces and spaces that can be used by skateboarders.

Recommendation

These two examples support Crawford's argument for avoiding a separation of everyday life from the concerns of designers: "[E]veryday urbanism demands a radical repositioning of the designer, a shifting of power from the professional expert to the ordinary person. Widespread expertise in everyday life acts as a leveling agent, eliminating the distance between professionals and users, between specialized knowledge and daily experience. The designer is immersed within contemporary society rather than superior to and outside it, and is thus forced to address the contradictions of social life from close up."¹⁷

So how can parkour shape our built environments? The skateboarder requires surface continuity; the traceur creates surface and spatial continuity. The skateboarder's contact is mediated through the skateboard; the traceur's is a direct interaction

between body and building, where each “produces the other”¹⁸ and where the traceur’s body is “citified”¹⁹ in that its movements spring from and are dependent on the forms of the city. A further study of the traceur’s moves reveals that points of contact with a building are at a minimum and generally used as launch points. If one is to create continuous surfaces to accommodate the skateboarder, in the same logic, to accommodate the traceur, surface can be formed to allow stronger, higher trajectories in their moves, and minimized to the necessary launch points. In essence, the traceur creates an ephemeral space where fewer obstacles are better but enough materiality should be provided to start or complete traces. The citification of the traceur should therefore not necessarily be bound to the forms of the city as in the definition given by Grosz, but can lead to an anthropomorphization of the city, where the city’s forms become facilitators of the traceur’s movements through becoming extensions of his body’s manifold gravity axes.

My paper is not an in-depth investigation into formal studies based on tracing—it can be a tricky field leading to “trace parks” and the institutionalization of parkour—but it is meant to continue the conversations on the importance of everyday activities and spaces over formal organizations, and especially the role of new habits which shape our social interactions and our environment, whether these habits are technology-based or purely organic such as learning to navigate gravity. This acceptance of new spaces and interactions within it extends beyond the discourse of what the relationship between our bodies, our environment and the governing powers on both these entities are. This conversation expands to what our notion of our bodies and its capabilities are and should prepare us for accepting new bodily movements first and a new environment as a necessary to allow the for the expanded body’s unhindered evolution.²⁰

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- ² Wikipedia contributors, "Free running," Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia, http://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Free_running&oldid=275383716 (accessed 5 March 2009).
- ³ Borden, Iain. *Skateboarding, Space and the City: Architecture and the Body*. Berg Publishers, 2001.
- ⁴ Ibid. p.89
- ⁵ Ibid. p.231
- ⁶ Tversky, Barbara. Structures Of Mental Spaces: How People Think About Space. *Environment and Behavior* 2003; 35; 66
- ⁷ Ibid.
- ⁸ Knabb, Ken. *Situationist International Anthology*. Bureau Of Public Secrets, 2007.
- ⁹ Ibid.
- ¹⁰ Sadler, Simon. *The Situationist City*. The MIT Press, 1999.
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- ¹² Chase, John, Margaret Crawford, and Kaliski John. *Everyday Urbanism*. Monacelli, 2008.
- ¹³ Pogrebin, Robin. A Defiant Architect's Gentler Side. *The New York Times*. Reported 19 December 2006.
- ¹⁴ Augé, Marc. *Non-Places: Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity, Second Edition*. Verso, 2009.
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- ¹⁶ Blum, Andrew. New Oslo Opera House Is Really a Stealth Skate Park. http://www.wired.com/culture/design/magazine/16-12/pl_design# Reported 24 November 2008 (accessed 27 February 2009)
- ¹⁷ Chase, John, Margaret Crawford, and Kaliski John. *Everyday Urbanism*. Monacelli, 2008.
- ¹⁸ Grosz, Elizabeth. Bodies-Cities. *Sexuality & Space (Princeton Papers on Architecture)*. Colomina, Beatriz; Ed. Princeton Architectural Press, 1996.
- ¹⁹ Ibid.
- ²⁰ See athlete/model Aimee Mullins' at the 2009 TED conference where she discusses the role of perception in accepting and understanding disability as ability.