Introduction

While the varied objectives of early architecture might be habitually hypothesized, the intentions of contemporary structures have increasingly been geared towards funneling the participant. Urban dwellers have gradually found themselves confronted more by a built environment determined to control their behavior, a trend that has subtlety been implemented and accepted readily by a public generally unaware of their changing space. This shift has especially afflicted European urban landscapes, as the need to update aging city structures has led to modernized cityscapes, and these new buildings have not been immune to the obsession with participatory control. Although designs with intent have been prevalent throughout history, particularly in the modern landscape, just as ubiquitous are those movements that work in direct contrast to these controls. An emerging disparate discipline, the urban acrobatic sport of parkour, also known as *l’art du déplacement* and *le parcours*, has been one of the more recent manifestations to stand in defiance of these architectures. Despite its unique place in multiple schools of thought, the French athletic philosophy can trace its contrarian foundations back through a modern record, channeling the same distaste for the built environment’s confining setting that earlier functions formerly considered.

The question remains, however, why the European urban environment proves to be such an exceptional playground for the exploration of these discordant practices. While simple aesthetics, like the uniform facades of Paris or the medley of generally low-rise styles present in London, might lay claim to influencing these unconformist movements into fruition, these interactions are mainly products of a cultural value system, a convention nearly institutionalized by the desires of primarily adolescent and
creative populations to rebel against their dominating space. Within the city, these groups do not see the metropolis simply as a shell for commerce or living; rather, “urban space and [its] social [realities] also becomes an instrument for experiencing the city”.¹ In the case of parkour, the experience is one that reverses the power dynamic, turning the relationship of control on its head and transforming the participatory individual into the master of the urban environment. The practice is also a sign of the evolution of this contrarian counterculture, the latest step and rebuttal in the battle between man and metropolis. Spanning the work of both academia and popular culture, a history of rebellion is clearly defined. Whether passively or deliberately, this record effectively led to the creation of the most physical and violent refusal to be dominated by architectures of control in history. This paper will explore just what parkour is in the scope of the built environment while simultaneously surveying where it stands in the timeline of a European lifestyle constantly at war with the city.

¹ Philipp Oswalt, Shrinking Cities (Lansing: Hatje Cantz, 2006), 449
What is Parkour?

It would, firstly, be reckless to subordinate parkour to an impressive display of acrobatic tricks in urban spaces. The practice is not just a show of urban gymnastics, a simple show of strength and technique above all else. Moreover, parkour cannot be confused with its close relative, free running, which is primarily focused on tricks, such as flips and spins. Rather, as Mark Toorock states, the man credited with bringing organized parkour to the United States, the sport was designed with practicality in mind:

Parkour is the art of moving through your environment using only your body and the surroundings to propel yourself. It can include running, jumping, climbing, even crawling, if that is the most suitable movement for the situation. Parkour could be grasped by imagining a race through an obstacle course; the goal is to overcome obstacles quickly and efficiently, without using extraneous movement … Because individual movements could vary so greatly by the situation, it is better to consider [p]arkour as defined by the intention instead of the movements themselves. If the intention is to get somewhere using the most effective movements with the least loss of momentum, then it could probably be considered [p]arkour.²

As designs with intent, particularly those within city borders, have become the norm in congested metropolises, parkour can effectively be classified as a mastery of urban spaces that are built to master the participant.

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The roots of parkour begin with Georges Hébert, an early 20th century military trainer and theorist. It was Hébert who developed le methode naturelle, or the Natural Method, an approach to physical and mental activity that focused on building both mind and body to be useful to oneself as well as those around him. Splitting up the techniques into 10 different acumens, including running and climbing, the emphasis on the obstacle course, or parcours, type of training, especially for military rescuers, set the stage for the creation of parkour. Using this model as a general guide and reference, parkour is created, with David Belle credited with starting the discipline. The name is loosely based around the verb parcourir, or “to run through,” an appropriate label for the way parkour practitioners slice through the built environment. Before David, however, the tale must also go through his father, who actually was absent for most of his childhood. Raymond Belle was a military firefighter, a sapeur-pompier, trained specifically to save people under the philosophy and training of Hébert. While Raymond’s first son followed in his footsteps, David was not so keen on the idea, but he was still profoundly affected by the physical training of the obstacle course, picking up on the basics of both philosophy and gymnastic skill. Moreover, the stories of his father’s heroics intensely impacted Belle’s life, an aspect of

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the discipline’s creation that would remind the adolescent of action movie stars.  

4 Started with a group of friends in the late 1980s in the Parisian suburb of Lisses when he was only a teenager, Belle took the idea of the obstacle course and began attributing it to his natural environment. His attempts at conventional occupation in the same fire brigade of his father as well as the French Marine corps—joining successfully in both but unable to remain committed—showed his distaste for staunch organization and he began to expand on le parkour more and more, teaching others the discipline as well as promoting it with videos.

From there, it became an rapidly growing physical culture, leading to a cult and underground following of traceurs, or tracers of Belle’s techniques. While the exercise escalated in popularity due to features in successful motion pictures like Casino Royale and District B13, its incredible success can also be attributed to videos on the Internet, largely on social networking video-sharing web sites like YouTube. A recent search for the term “parkour” on YouTube yielded nearly 60,000 results. Despite not having any set of distinct rules, styles, or any type of organized form on its own, the aggressive urban sport has been transformed, in its purest form, as a type of martial arts. The mental is just as tested as the physical; seeing a path and convincing the body of attacking the built environment in that entirely jarring way is arguably just as difficult to train as those acrobatic moves. On purely physical grounds, however, traceurs can be found leaping or climbing up walls or fences, jumping from rooftop to rooftop, or crawling on hands and

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feet atop walkways not meant to be traversed by humans. Parkour requires incredible balance, strength, speed, and, above all else, the ability to withstand impact.

The remarkableness of physical and mental feats, however, does not come without precedent. As an adolescent growing up in the suburbs of Paris, a unique urban landscape that fights with density, modernity and “a marked preference for a detached house, [...] associated with France’s recent rural past,” Belle took the path of Paul H. Ray and Sherry Ruth Anderson’s Cultural Creatives, resisting norms to blaze his own trail. While parkour has become an international phenomenon, it is still a philosophy and sport that is both distinctly Western European and metropolitan. The argument for these attributions, however, does not have to be ostentatious in nature; past examples shows that parkour is not just an urban fad built around stunts and performance. Furthermore, it is not Belle’s culmination of restless adolescence molded into an acrobatic art form. As much as parkour is something entirely unique in the city, it is also a practice whose foundations are rooted in cosmopolitan rebellion, the super hero message and a history of urban dissidence.

**Designs with Intent**

One cannot consider the dissenting act of parkour and its antecedents, however, without first establishing a general understanding of the city as a built environment heavily influenced by architectures of controls. Earlier metropolises saw socioeconomic divisions established by which floor a family or individual might live on, a schism that

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only widened over the course of time and the expansion of transportation technologies. As cities began to become increasingly more gentrified, forcing poorer populations out of city centers and into the periphery, a decided power differentiation occurred. Urban theorist Fran Tonkiss interprets the delineation of authority succinctly:

> Urban architecture is readable as a “landscape of power,” a built environment of dominance and subordination that is also legible in the spatial assertions of a corporate skyline, the decaying hulks of redundant urban industries, or in the blank spaces of deteriorated zones that capital has rejected.\(^6\)

From this established dichotomy of power, encouraged by the ruling party’s desire to create spaces most comfortable for their aims and purposes, came an increased emphasis on architectures of persuasion and authority. Furthermore, this aspiration to control participants of architecture created a new form of architect, one acutely aware of human psychologically. Author Jon Kolko sees those individuals seeking this result as “shapers of behavior,” calling them “Interaction Designers” and claiming that their entire profession is geared around the understanding and manipulation of conduct.\(^7\) But it is Michel Foucault’s 1975 work *Discipline and Punish* that stands as the most telling of the stories of architectures of control, playing with the idea of English theorist Jeremy Bentham’s Panopticon and seeing just as much power in defensive design than the stockades of the medieval.\(^8\) By integrating these forms of preventive and psychological

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\(^6\) Fran Tonkiss, *Space, the City and Social Theory: Social Relations and Urban Forms* (London: Polity, 2005), 60  
\(^7\) Jon Kolko, *Thoughts on Interaction Design* (Savannah: Brown Bear LLC, 2007), 3  
\(^8\) Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: Birth of the Prison* (tr. Alan Sheridan) (Harmondsworth: Peregrine Books, 1979)
disciplinary architecture into urban spaces, an idea introduced to the modern era as early as 1785 with Bentham’s design, the passiveness of preventive architecture saw an acquiescing by its patrons. Public spaces no longer were necessarily public; those who design had the power to discriminate and exclude by simple adjustments. Examples of such an allegation are numerous across the public urban sphere, ranging from anti-social benches or spiked fences to ward off potential loiterers to faux public squares designed to make the pedestrian feel too uncomfortable to remain.

Public spaces are becoming increasingly more privatized, created under the guise of democratic inclusiveness but in actuality, exclusive to anyone but the paying customer. But they are not always seemingly adversarial, habitually working towards the common good. Issues of crime, for instance, can be prevented early by simply eliminating neglect in urban areas, according to James Wilson and George Kelling’s theory of broken windows. But too often, the intentions of these architectures work to play on the subconscious, involving the work of psychologists now more than ever. Studies have found that colors can affect shopping patterns; interior designers may create harder, plastic seats to encourage patrons to stay shorter. This knowledge, when applied to the

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architect’s design, can be dangerously and subtly intrusive, robbing the participant of completely self-directed decision-making. The general understanding and ceding of both privacy and autonomy by participants of these architectures—embedded practically everywhere, ranging from personal e-mail to shopping malls—has allowed for a general acceptance for them. But this passive reception does not come without cynicism, and it is primarily this disparagement that allowed for those dissatisfied with the confines of these designs with intent to organize and create movements to combat them.

Flânerie in Paris

On the Parisian front, in the mid-19th century, Emperor Napoleon III created the foundations for the modern city, and thusly, the modern cosmopolite. By authorizing a city superintendent named Baron Georges Haussmann to use eminent domain without abandon to destroy buildings in the still very medieval city, the French capital would soon be demolished and remodeled in the first and most complete urban renewal project since Pope Sixtus V’s 16th century transformation of Rome. Under Haussmann’s watch, the grand boulevards of the present City of Lights were constructed, boasting organized and fully planned commercial and residential centers with the bourgeoisie and upper class urbanite in mind. The arcades of Paris, as the long row of stores would be dubbed, helped create the first of the Western European reactions to urban dwelling, transforming simple pedestrians into flâneurs. These strollers were first interested in the covered stores manifested by Haussmannisation, but the term was more appropriately attributed soon
after to those Parisians who wandered the avenues of the city with only the sole purpose of exploring it.

It was the *flâneur* that gives architectural history its first look at the human reaction to the planned city. The metropolis, formerly an organic embodiment, met its first showing of the premeditated design, encouraging people to walk the streets and leading to cultural “third-place” phenomenon like the sidewalk café while simultaneously making the once narrow roadways easier to defend in case of rebellion. But it was the distinguishing habits of the emerging class that would prove the most interesting:

The hero of modern life, the *flâneur* takes every passing, ephemeral moment in—he consumes his surrounding visually, while apparently maintaining a detached, anonymous and essentially distant relation to the urban landscape he moves through.\(^{10}\)

Thusly, the first widespread response to the developing modern city was one of novelty, embracing the new excitement of the city street with a culture of strolling and gazing. Whatever malevolent intentions Haussmann and Napoleon III might have had in regards to controlling the population more easily, they also succeeded in introducing the urban dweller to the crowd. Social critic Walter Benjamin covered the *flâneur* extensively over his life, stemming from his studying of the arcades in his *Passagenwek*, or *Arcades Project*. In unison with studying the arcades, he followed the poet Charles Baudelaire, whose work *À Une Passant* proved to encapsulate Benjamin’s idea of the wandering urbanite and inspire the critic to consider their kind further. Benjamin, ever the Leftist, saw the *flâneur* as “the individualist on the edge of the abyss, the solipsistic soul facing

the world of capitalist alienation, [and] the dreamer lost in a world of phantasmagoria”.¹¹ The city was becoming commoditized; the strolling flâneur, created out of curiosity, was the target, as the aimless wanderer proved a likely target for window-shopping.

It was also this commercial intention that began the process of changing the purpose of public space, reducing it from the chaotic actuality that truly made it public to the privatized public spaces that contemporary urbanites now find familiar. Architectural historian Rosalyn Deutsche considers these spaces as “a new kind of commercial environment based on the rigid exclusion of undesirable populations, heavily policed … to ensure ‘public safety’ and optimum control.”¹² While she may be referencing the piazzas that litter countless business parks in the modern built environment, this same type of exclusion occurred in 19th century Paris, as the arcades preyed on the bourgeoisie of the city but systematically disqualified the poor who could hardly afford the rising city rents. While the cityscape before Haussmannisation might have been ruled an unacceptable

¹¹ Peter Buse, Ken Hirschkop, Scott McCracker and Bertrand Taithe. *Benjamin’s Arcades: An unGuided tour* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2005), 5
¹² L. Andreotti, “Rethinking Public Spaces,” *Journal of Architectural Education* (vol. 49, no. 1, Sept. 1999), 2
façade for the capital of the French people, it was one that was surely more egalitarian, unrefined but natural in its formation. Paired with Baron Haussmann’s centrally planned presentation of Paris, increasingly preoccupied with “the new dream world of capitalism and the commodity good,”\(^\text{13}\) the urban dweller was becoming detached from its authentic roots to the streets, instead being led by the allure of window shopping boulevards. T.J. Clark’s *The Painting of Modern Life* expounds on this idea. He views the “move to the world of grand boulevards and grand magasins and their accompanying industries of tourism, recreation, fashion, and display”\(^\text{14}\) as the main culprit in both dividing classes within Paris as well as transforming “small entrepreneurial capitalism to increasingly monopolistic forms”\(^\text{15}\) counterproductive towards the equality of the free-access metropolis.

Furthermore, while intensifying and solidifying the place of the wandering *flâneur* and the place of commercialization within the city, Haussmannisation also strongly affected the suburbs of the city, the outer *quartier*, by ousting those who had lost their homes to the city fringes. For those left behind, the boom that occurred after turning the city into the center of the Western world raised the population, sending the aforementioned displaced to the suburbs. These ousted Parisians, typically the poor of the dilapidated and working-class areas, created arenas of angst, an anxiety against the results of modernity that would surely extend centuries later and influence Belle’s parkour


\(^{15}\) Jonathan Crary, “Spectacle, Attention, Counter-Memory,” *October* (vol. 50, Autumn 1989), 100
invention. This Marxist approach cannot explain the entirety of the frustration that led to the creation of *l’art du déplacement*, but it surely played a role, as generational apprehension would not simply disappear with time. The physical renaissance of Paris may have increased its allure to tourists and helped the French military and government better protect itself against insurgency, but it also played a significant role in beginning the task of ominously alienating the urbanite and creating an architectural trend that would only hasten the process with an increasing emphasis on urban modernity.

**Psychogeography and the Situationist’s Dérive**

Over the course of the next century, Europe would see itself move through a period of massive political upheaval and unrest. The architectural conversation, in turn, followed suit, moving closer and closer to issues of power and control. Accordingly, so went the structures and planning erected at the time as well, battling with the variety of designs and ideas that resulted from an increasing amount of plurality of thought. The Imperial Neoclassicism of Hitler’s Germany, for instance, proved to be the starkest reminder of architecture’s authority and ability to both subvert and inspire populations. After the end of the Second World War, the dialogue regarding designs with intent did not slow, and the rationality of architects such as Le Corbusier was adopted as the nouveau style, a step towards progress and modernity. Not all critics of the urban environment, however, agreed with the latest avant-garde, standing in defiance of the rigid rationality of metropolitan design, and organizations across the continent were
formed to establish academic fronts in criticizing these methods. One of the first groups, COBRA—an acronym combining the pan-European efforts of Copenhagen, Brussels and Amsterdam, where its proponents were based—displayed a unified literary effort to offer the dissenting voice to the rationalist web continuously applied to urban planning. Urban historian Simon Sadler offers a concise summary of the frustration expressed by these early modern nonconformists:

The triumph of reason had left no space for imagination or expression: writing in the first edition of the COBRA’s journal, Michel Colle mourned the disappearance of expressionist and surrealist tendencies in architecture, complaining that, under the “pretext of putting a little order and discipline back into architectural expression,” Le Corbusier and his allies had instituted an architecture of “right angles” and “cadaverous rigidity.” [...] Colle noted “the state of total and passive submission” experienced by “the man in the street placed before the architectural phenomenon,” and he felt that the Corbusian concept of the functional “machine for living in,” rather than liberating the common man, was interring him as a component of functionalist society.16

Thus, with the combination of groups such as COBRA, the Psychogeographical Society of London, and Paris’ Internationale Lettriste, the Situationist Internationale was born. This group created a philosophy and outlook that, while not a direct step from the 19th century’s flâneur, displayed yet another piece of the puzzle towards creating a cultural underpinning necessary for the concept of parkour to be realized.

16 Simon Sadler, The Situationist City (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1999), 7
Stemming from earlier Surrealist ideas, the Situationists’ most profound mark on architectural history rests with the *dérive*, or “drift.” Like the *flâneur’s* obsession with gazing, the Situationist *dérive* is preoccupied with moving through space while simultaneously aware of one’s psychogeographic position at any time. Psychogeography, a school of thought that incorporates feeling and self-perception of space rather than the actuality of said environment, grew as a similar dogma, built on the growing amount of literature after Sigmund Freud’s commentary on the mind and subconscious. Accordingly, the Situationists allowed these base impulses control them, letting themselves “be drawn by the attractions of the terrain and the encounters they find,” controlled more by the “psychogeographical contours, with constant currents, fixed points and vortexes that strongly discourage entry into or exit from certain zones”¹⁷ than by simple chance. Guy Debord, the de facto unifier and leader of the Situationists, believed this method of seeing the urban environment would free the participant from the rigid constraints of city architecture’s designed paths, instead promoting the position of individualized unities through drifting. In his 1957 print *The Naked City*, Debord speaks for the Situationist Internationale in his depiction of Paris, split into parts to signify the various neighborhoods of the city while also showing the most common paths of reaching each area. The gaps in between each segment signify the presence of motorized traffic, an unnatural interruption but one whose specter is very much present in the eyes of the Situationist. The *dérive* was the tool in which these mid-20th century dissenters attempted to break away from the applied Cartesian urban grid; the first attempt resulted in the New

Guy Debord’s map of Paris shows the Situationist and psychogeographic piecing of the French city, displaying the common paths from area to area as well as signifying the presence of the automobile with the varying gaps.\textsuperscript{18}

Babylon project, spearheaded by Situationist and Dutch artist Constant. Following the principles of “unitary urbanism,” Constant worked closely with other Situationist members to “[reject] the utilitarian logic of the consumer society, aiming instead for the realization of a dynamic city … in which freedom and play would have a central role”.\textsuperscript{19}

His undertaking, New Babylon, was a utopian idea, one that could simply never fully be


\textsuperscript{19} Hilde Heynen, “New Babylon: The Antinomies of Utopia,” \textit{Assemblage} (no. 29, Apr. 1996), 24
realized in any practical application. But the amalgamation of sketches, drawings, maps, and plans, along with Debord’s specific instructions on the dérive, were all part of a similar dialogue to further establish this unitary urbanism.

Together, the pair, in 1958’s “The Declaration of Amsterdam,” write that their goal is “the uninterrupted complex activity through which man’s environment is consciously recreated according to progressive plans in all domains”. In essence, the city has its own psychogeographic relief and map; it is the purpose of the dérive and the re-imagination of the metropolitan built environment to play cartographer and see these new diagrams and plans to fruition. Thomas F. McDonough recognizes the correlation between flâneur and Situationist, but also distinguishes the difference in how the two interpreted modernizing urban spaces:

The dérive took place literally below the threshold of visibility, in the sense of being beyond what is visible to the voyeur’s gaze. As Debord describes it, the dérive replaced the figure of the voyeur with that of the walker: “One or more persons committed to the dérive abandon, for an undefined period of time, the motives generally admitted for action and movement, their relations, their labor and leisure activities, abandoning themselves to the attractions of the terrain and the encounters proper to it.” In allowing themselves “to be drawn by the solicitations of the terrain,”

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persons on the dérive escaped the imaginary totalizations of the eye and instead chose a kind of blindness.\textsuperscript{21}

The speculatory gaze was gone by the 1960s, replaced by a strong preference for action. These dissenters, now walking through the city entirely on impulse, drew closer still to parkour. The flâneur allotted the traceur the contemplative eye of awareness, selectivity noticing the city while not entirely being a part of it. Like the stroller, the drifting Situationist also stood alone from the average pedestrian, creating “situations” and following spectacles instead of passively considering the arcade and its patrons.

Furthermore, both movements also sought to control these designs with intent, taking these architectures and using them for their own devices. But, setting itself apart from its counterpart, the dérive incorporated motion into the dissenting philosophy, requiring the urban participant to move through space rather than simply judge and contemplate it. This distinction, while seemingly minute when compared against the profundity of its philosophy and

\textsuperscript{21} Thomas F. McDonough, “Situationist Space,” \textit{October} (vol. 67, Winter, 1994), 73
phenomenon, is an important one in understanding parkour. Drifting was not an evolutionary step on the chain of dissent from strolling, per se, but the tradition was updated to include locomotion of the human body, another phase in the parkour development.

Just as important, however, was the actual concept of psychogeography. This unique lens of seeing the world dictated the Situationist’s building block for the dérive, as well as all of their deconstructions and re-creations of the city. Although the case of immediate and uniform overhauling of the urbanite psyche was the goal, the Situationists were permissive of allowing the analysis and application to be made through person experience, as Debord suggests in his “Theory of the Dérive”:

> With the aid of old maps, aerial photographs and experimental dérives, one can draw up hitherto lacking maps of influences, maps whose inevitable imprecision at this early stage is no worse than that of the first navigational charts. The only difference is that it is no longer a matter of precisely delineating stable continents, but of changing architecture and urbanism.\(^{22}\)

In creating new maps, major European cities were adjusted to fit the desires of the true Situationist; the actual physical juxtaposition of these parts was made less important. Furthermore, the playfulness and spontaneity of creating these paths was just as important as the actual sober division of its parts. By simply discrediting the actual plans of cities, taking bird’s eye view maps and breaking them apart as one saw fit, the

architectures of control of time and space were also broken down. Moreover, the concept of psychogeography effectively moved to expand the mind to think of the city in a new way, whereas the flâneur only considered his immediate area. It is of no coincidence that Paris was chosen as the center of this movement. While the essential capital of the European intellectual world, the anxieties lingering from Haussmannisation, the arcades and the disquieted suburbs made a perfect amphitheater for the Situationists to showcase their techniques and viewpoint. Their approach to the urban built environment, both holistic and critical, was essential to seeing the manifestation of parkour, a conception being realized in avant-garde architectural theory’s own backyard.

Pop Culture Rebellion

Although the movements across the intellectual front were important in building l’art du displacement, they were habitually the articulation of societal feelings being experienced underneath the surface of an otherwise functional cityscape. However, the anxiety was real and manifested itself into, up to the end of the 20th century, two dissenting European academic traditions. But the idea that David Belle and his supporters started parkour based on the teachings of Parisian scholarly literature would be naïve; they surely had a place in affecting teachings and reflecting the zeitgeist of their respective periods, but one cannot picture the contrarian Belle hounding over an old copy of the Internationale Situationniste. Rather, a more populist approach was also be taken into account. In the 1980s, when parkour was first created, mass media had fully ingratiated itself into every fabric of society. Technologies were cheaper and cultural art
forms were as accessible as ever before. In regards to subject matter, the image of the heroic rebel was often glorified, and the realm of his dissent extended beyond the simplicity of fighting against some evil villain. More exactly, that same antagonist very often was the stifling severity and inflexibility of the built environment. To a child being raised in an atmosphere oversaturated with media, popular culture’s place as a facilitator for initiating populist change can surely not be discounted.

Film

One of the most obvious references of parkour in pop culture lies with film, expressed primarily in the work of Hong Kong martial arts movies. In Alec Wilkinson’s profile of parkour and its founder, Belle makes it clear that he equates his sport as a type of martial art. “There’s a quote by Bruce Lee that’s my motto: ‘There are no limits. There are plateaus, but you must stay there, you must go beyond them,’” Belle said. “A man must constantly exceed his level.” Moreover, the scenes in Bruce Lee films are often based around pursuit and escape, the very reasoning behind parkour’s existence. Lee’s method to martial arts also fit perfectly into Belle’s own philosophy, adopting “adaptability and evolution—each central to the heart of parkour.” Lee was also the developer of Jeet Kune Do, a combat philosophy in tune with the nonconformist approach employed by parkour:

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Finally, a Jeet Kune Do man who says Jeet Kune Do is exclusively Jeet Kune Do is simply not with it. He is still hung up on his self-closing resistance, in this case anchored down to reactionary pattern, and naturally is still bound by another modified pattern and can move within its limits. He has not digested the simple fact that truth exists outside all molds; pattern and awareness is never exclusive.25

By discarding the idea of molds and patterns, his philosophy espoused the same type of chaotic discipline that personifies the variable and fluctuating sight of the traceur. Although Bruce Lee might have provided the crux for the philosophy, one of his disciples—more specifically, a stuntman turned star himself—proved to be the cinematic embodiment of the parkour ideal.

Following his stint as a Lee stunt double, Jackie Chan began an expansive movie career that has turned him into household name on the back of his martial arts and comedy prowess. It is his stunt work, however, that proves to be the most imperative element of his films in regards to parkour. Well-known for performing his own stunts, many scenes in Chan’s filmography showcase a curious similarity to the parkour videos currently posted by traceurs as well as Belle’s original work. The constant underdog, Chan’s characters are often put in situations where he must flee from a seemingly never-ending mob of adversaries. In essence, the narrative nearly always places Chan in escape mode, looking for an out and exit wherever he is and committing himself to it through some amazing physical feat. It is this surprise after he completes one of these deeds that more often than not endears the audience to Chan, and most likely the same reasoning

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that parkour has caught on so quickly as an international phenomenon. The allusions to
the process and cinematography are also easily observable. Needing to flee, the
characters that Chan portrays make their choices immediately, quickly moving through
space and taking one obstacle at a time. The same “adaptability and evolution” that Lee
professed is evidenced here; Chan’s fluidity of motion, never moving backwards except
to move forward again, harkens the same flexible and unpredictable movements of a
parkour traceur.

While scripted, the idea behind the narrative is not stilted whatsoever, whether
Chan glides down the side of a 20-story glass building in 1998’s *Who Am I?* or slides
down a 100-foot pole through glass and electrical wiring in 1985’s *Police Story*. At its
most base level, the escapism that audiences look for in his movies is the same type that
traceurs seek, constantly trying to master their surroundings regardless of the situation.
Additionally, the stylistic devices used by parkour practitioners distinctly resemble the
cinematography used in movies like Chan’s, where fluid escape are key. In both major
motion picture and traceur work—self-made, so how they would like to view themselves
is not a question—the camera is habitually placed at a distance for these stunts. Often
completely unique in the cinematic approach and in opposition to the typical scene, a
first-person view or three-quarter shot for a parkour-esque move would be impractical
and silly. Instead, it is the scope of overcoming the architectural obstacle that is the main
focus of the scene. Wide angles, zoomed out lenses and establishing shots allow for the
motion to be the star, not the persona. These architectures of control—seemingly
hindering the human ability—play the role of villain for these scenes, as the parkour
traceur or action star heroically rebel and surmount the allegedly undefeatable. The
buildings and structures that both the film star and urban gymnast effectively surmount, architectures that deny the viewer a clear path, play as antagonist, keeping the hero from his goal of escape. In this similarity of goal and presentation, film and parkour coincide and directly affect each other.

**Sport**

In December 1783, “equipped with two umbrellas re-enforced by cords running from the tips of the ribs to the bottom of the handles,” Louis-Sébastian Lenormand made the first “parachute” jump from a stationary surface, marking the first example of personal aerial dominion with his leap from the Montpellier observatory. For thrill seekers, the increased altitude of flying brought about the natural extension to skydiving. With the increasing rise of cities, BASE jumping turned into a new activity. The phenomenon, which involves parachuting off of fixed objects, names itself with an acronym to consider possible types of surfaces that one might jump off: Building, Antenna, Span (bridges), and Earth. While Lenormand’s jump would be considered one of novelty, spectacle, and science, the BASE jumpers of today are self-professed thrill seekers, adrenaline junkies typically bored with the regularity of skydiving. However, this recreational activity, a product of the 1980s as well, is like parkour in its dominance over urban environments, as jumpers often illegally leap from tall metropolitan buildings for their next adventure. The early adoption of dominating urban space, however, as well

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26 Lynn White, Jr., “The Invention of the Parachute,” *Technology and Culture*, (vol. 9, no. 3, July 1968),
as the location—France, again—is more than telling of a Western culture obsessed with the idea of overcoming architecture.

Although BASE jumping is similar in its dissidence, the most obvious and direct sports example rests and ends with skateboarding, especially within the current modern setting. Developed in the late 1970s, the sport is one more akin to free running in function, designed around the concept of tricks and not efficient motion. But parkour and skateboarding share one central trait in that both forms are directly adversarial to the urban space, using it to train and practice and also bucking against the designer’s wishes. Both dangerous, even when performed correctly, corporate entities, habitually the designers behind city spaces, worry about liability and property damage issues, effectively denying skateboarders access to their areas. The concept is not foreign to anyone who sees signs warding off skaters, but there are direct architectures of control, truly disciplinary designs, that seek to slow down these athletes. Former professional skater and Berkeley doctorate student Ocean Howell’s “The Poetics of Security: Skateboarding, Urban Design, and the New Public Space” does not apologize for his sport, but he does take issue with the supposed idea of the “public”:

Recognizing that redevelopment spaces fostered pathologies, cities and corporations have begun to build more friendly spaces in the past couple of decades. But they have been careful to ensure that the spaces are only friendly to a select subset of the public, namely office workers and consumers … Because the resultant spaces appear open but exclude the vast majority of the citizenry, they represent a restrictive discourse of publicness … It is by virtue of its status as a misuse of these spaces—and
“Pig ears” or clips, like these lined on the edge of a ledge, are intended to discourage skateboarders from using it to perform tricks or grind. This type of disciplinary design can also be dangerous for parkour traceurs, as clips can catch on physical extremities and ruin balance, and mark one of the more recent models of exclusionary urban design.  

because it is a symptom of defensive design—that skateboarding is exceptionally good at drawing attention to the quietly exclusionary nature of the new public space.  

It is this type of exclusionary architecture, created to specifically defend the designers’ interests under the guise of inclusive publicness, which alienates the urban dweller further from his supposed place of liberty within his environment. Like the parkour traceur, the skateboarder feels as if he is totally free to move wherever he would like in public space—so long as that movement is sanctioned and approved by the ruling bodies. For those individuals who seek to move through cities in a way of their own choosing, this estrangement and isolation from desire occurs.


As skateboarding has been one of the most visible culprits in urban spaces—a cumbersome wooden board with four wheels is hardly an inconspicuous item—they have held a heavy burden of the policing and surveillance assault, but the same architectures that exclude them can still discourage the average traceur. The deliberately and defensive uneven surfaces of ledges and rails, for instance, can prove just as dangerous for a parkour practitioner as a skater, as both are extremely dependent upon anticipation and balance. These “pig ears” and clips come subtlety to most, quietly excluding, and may even come in the form of art, as sculptor Ronnie Frostad was recently commissioned to create bronze starfish and sea turtles for San Francisco’s Rinkon Park ledge seating to discourage skating. Foucault believed these designs with defensive intent were even more effective than constant surveillance, as a police officer confronting an adolescent traceur or skateboarder would certainly garner a much more unfavorable reaction from the gathered public than simply discouraging either party from being there altogether.

Skateboarding harkens the Situationist dérives, as the street skating culture requests a free flowing meander throughout urbanized spaces. Skate videos show tricks being performed, usually on sidewalks or large plazas, in a continuous line, expressing the improvisation of form as well as emphasizing motion. It is this sport that stands as a passionate and vehement dance with the antagonistic architecture, long gone from the detachment of the flâneur, and it is this violent expression that marks it as one of the most direct ancestors to parkour.

Art

Similar to skateboarding, graffiti also shares a type of aggressive challenge inherent in its portrayal. Urban art, built on the defacement of public spaces owned by others, has thusly managed to find itself in the face of architectures in direct opposition to it. Textured and stuccoed walls and special anti-graffiti paints are increasingly being used to dissuade potential “taggers,” as graffiti artists are called. Urban artists enable expression on the canvas of the city, their vandalizing in direct dissent of the designer’s intent. The differing opinion of art to the status quo need not be documented here; there stands a longstanding tradition of the contrarian attitude of the artistic community. However, the medium is what sets the graffiti artist apart, and the choice to create on a building side rather than canvas is a deliberate one. British street artist Banksy, for instance, is one of the most well known of his craft, spreading his stencil and graffiti works across the world. His art, primarily situated within heavily trafficked urban spaces, are almost exclusively social commentaries, and the city street provides a much more effective, democratizing canvas than the confines of a museum. Another example, the documentary “Style Wars,” offers a compelling look into graffiti of 1980s New York City. In a way, the artists profiled, including musicians and breakdancers, express their frustration with the overbearing and policing forms of the city. Moreover, it provides an early look into a hip hop culture that was created from the slums, similar to the Parisian suburbs, and directly responds to the social injustice of urban blight, which stands as a type of design with intent of neglect.

Other graffiti artists propose another interesting phenomenon, simply acting as territorial taggers. These artists rarely exceed beyond the tagging of their crew’s, as they
often organize, name, marking city walls and billboards with their own designation. To the territorial tagger, that area is there space and the presence of such architectures simply owned by them. While both approaches to street art might drastically vary in execution and purpose, their effective dismissal of urban conventions is enough to warrant them a place in a culture of disrespect for controlling design, and further cement the place of pop culture as a mitigating factor in the path to parkour.

**Speed and Stoplights**

When considering the topics early discussed, there still remains glaring question: why yet another type of form of dissent? Is the *traceur* just a practicing *flâneur* with locomotive purpose or a drifting Situationist with a concerted mindset? The final piece to the creation of the parkour rests with one of the most significant developments to ever happen to the urban environment, and it comes in the form of the automobile. The 20th century saw the effective adoption of the car almost uniformly. Whereas the Transportation Revolution shifted entire populations from cities to suburbs, the car made that achievement even more possible. Within the cities themselves, often left in disfigurement and neglect due to the mass exoduses out of the city, crosswalks, stoplights and paved roads were erected. Advances in the technology of the automobile, furthermore, increased the speed of the city. As roadways became arteries, sidewalks became afterthoughts, and there simply was very little time or room for casual *flânerie* or aimless drifting. Between speed, streets and the architecture to control them, parkour found its aggression in emulating the power of the automobile.
Firstly, it is important to recognize the public spaces of the urban environment for what they have increasingly become. In Richard Sennett’s seminal work *The Fall of Public Man*, the flâneur’s sight and the spectacle of the Situationist dérive are replaced by the desire to just move:

The erasure of alive public space contains an even more perverse idea—that of making space contingent upon motion … an area to move through, not be in … The idea of space is derivative form motion parallels exactly the relations of space to motion produced by the private automobile. One does not use one’s car to see the city; the automobile is not a vehicle for touring—or, rather, it is not used as such, except by joyriding adolescent drivers … The city street acquires, then, a peculiar function—to permit motion; if it regulates motion too much, by lights, one-ways, and the like, motorists become nervous or angry.\(^{30}\)

The automobile gives the individual a semblance of private space moving through apparent public arenas, as anyone who sings along to the car radio might attest. Appropriately, the rules change for public discourse, dictated now by machines controlled by purposeful humans. It is a notion that profoundly affects the urban dweller, as a pedestrian, in multiple ways. The speed at which an automobile can take humans adds an ease that can increase levels of anxiousness when that motion is at all hindered. Sennett writes that the “ease of motion unknown to any prior urban civilization [creates] the most anxiety-laden of daily activities … [as] we take unrestricted motion of the individual to be an absolute right,” creating an environment full of public spaces that can

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be “meaningless or even maddening unless it can be subordinated to free movement”.\textsuperscript{31} It is this anxiety that speaks most to the creation of parkour; with the supremacy of roadways within the city, the urban dweller becomes significantly more detached from his place as a pedestrian.

In the case of the Situationist maps, for instance, the gaps in between the segments showed the group’s preoccupation with these interruptions. How can an individual, they might ask, drift through the city aimlessly with the constant interruption of stoplights and “Don’t Walk” signs? For those urbanites moving without dissidence, the experience can be just as jarring. As a collective \textit{polis}, Gary Bridge and Sophie Watson believe that “the politics of community can be exclusionary of others and oppressive towards its own members … a homogenizing meaning that denies difference”,\textsuperscript{32} thusly raising levels of anxiety by stifling self-actualization. Analogous to the speed and power of the automobile, constantly restrained by traffic laws, the parkour \textit{traceur} is the engine waiting to be unleashed. He is fast and purposeful, moving through space under controlled high velocities. Removed from “the walking city” and into “automobile cities,”\textsuperscript{33} parkour combines the two aspects, utilizing the discordant desires to “stroll” and “drift” and the purposeful speed and urban mastery of a culture dominated by the car. The first mainstream video of parkour confirms this suspicion.

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After receiving underground success, Great Britain’s BBC network heard of David Belle’s exploits and employed him for a commercial for their main channel. Dressed in a suit, eating a meal, Belle sits at a table in a high-rise apartment before rising, baring his chest, and climbing out of the window. The minute and a half long video shows Belle running atop rooftops, scaling walls, and quickly moving across the London cityscape. All the while, scenes of street signs reading “Wait” and slow moving traffic, both pedestrian and vehicular, are interjected with the rhythmic dance of parkour. Appropriately named “Rush Hour,” the commercial proved to be a prolific introduction of the sport to the world, and embodied the general feeling of the *traceur* to the automaton-like public below.

**Conclusion**

The parkour practitioner is the effective combination of the *flâneur*, Situationist, pop culture mirror, and automobile. In the overly saturated urban environment, where stimuli constantly bombard the individual, it is only appropriate that it would be such a varied fusion of so many different philosophies and elements to help build one concerted identity such as the *traceur*. The European landscape generated many of these ideas, as they were born from modernity and modernity from the intellectuals of the Old World. It was particularly around Paris that we see a concentration of these concepts, beginning with the advent of the *flâneur*. Susan Buck-Morss writes that “progress became a religion in the nineteenth century, world expositions its holy shrines, commodities its cult objects,
and Haussmann’s ‘new’ Paris its Vatican City,” attributing development and growth as the culprits for urbanite agitation. The French capital only set the stage, however; modern architecture, built in the name of “progress,” would spread across the rest of the Europe and the disparate tradition would move with it. Today, with the Information Age’s terminal effectively connecting everyone in Paul Virilio’s Overexposed City, the message has spread and done so quickly, creating an international following that only grows with time. The disenchantment with designs with intent is uniform, as is the use with these architectures. Density, surveillance, and a bombardment of architectures of control play important roles in this isolation—the American Midwest, for instance, would be a poor arena outside of a few major metropolises—but the values are increasingly shared among populations empathetic of one another, escalating the sense of urgency to rebel. But it truly is the culture, a dissonant and discordant history of urbanites, that creates and empowers parkour to be such a strong phenomenon. As law professor Neal Kumar Katyal puts it, “Architecture influences behavior; it does not determine it”. Accordingly, these designs with intent cannot ultimately decide what paths that the traceur, flâneur or Situationist lead, making them part of a long-standing, disparate urban tradition.

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