

Dreaming of Infrastructure

A silhouette of a person performing a handstand against a sunset sky. The person is inverted, with their head near the bottom and legs spread wide. The background is a warm, golden-orange sky with a city skyline visible at the bottom. The title 'Dreaming of Infrastructure' is written in large, white, outlined letters in the upper left corner.

**Architecture as Control and
Parkour as Rebellion**

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The art of parkour represented an unusual illustration of cultural dissent. Traceurs, or people who practiced parkour in 1970s France, did not attempt to invoke structural change. Instead, they strived to alter society's current attitudes toward the use of space, along with their own frame of understanding and role within it. Feeling physically, socially, and economically restricted by the Parisian architecture, traceurs established freedom through parkour and quietly removed themselves from the elements of perceived control.

Parkour was unique in finding a voice through public space. Traceurs did not protest with picket signs or rallies but through resistance of physical expectations. They jumped across building rooftops, swung from railings, and leapt to trajectories with the greatest ease. Many traceurs defined parkour differently, and many still question its meaning and purpose behind this physical art form. For instance, many scholars argue that parkour played a greater role in Paris than mere acrobatics. Also known as free running, it has been practiced for over half a century. Parkour was widely utilized throughout the Vietnam War by the French military as a way to cross unexpected jungle terrain with speed and efficiency. It wasn't until the late 1970s, however, that actor, choreographer, and founder, David Belle, coined the word "parkour" and grew the art form into what it is today.

Growing up in the Paris suburb of Lisses, Belle practiced parkour as a way to "efficiently pass any obstacle" he encountered (Belle). In an interview with *Urban Freeflow*, Belle defines parkour as a "method of training which allows us to overcome obstacles, both in the urban and natural environments." He recalls how he helped his friend retrieve his keys from a second-story apartment by skillfully scaling the building. Belle practically

finds it humorous that his practice of parkour still perplexes his friends. "We're in a society where everyone is afraid," Belle states. "Fear will always be there." But in moments of weakness, he reassures himself of his own internal strength through parkour.

As cities became increasingly developed, poorer immigrant families were forced out of the Parisian city centers into the outer suburban areas. With this urban growth, buildings and other infrastructures became representative of the widening gap between classes. According to Nathan Guss, author of "Parkour and the Multitude: Politics of a Dangerous Art," the French suburbs developed from the increased housing shortages in 1960s Paris. However, the new houses were poorly built. They slowly underwent "physical degradation," mainly due to "distance from the urban core and its services, cultural shops and activities" (Guss 75).

Interestingly enough, it wasn't the adults, but the children who would expand the art of parkour. Many of the first-generation immigrant children felt alienated and disempowered because they were "neither integrated into the culture of their parents nor their country" (Guss 75). They felt that their urban environment misunderstood and confined them. As a result, they found relief through parkour, propelling themselves into a far riskier environment. They resisted the normality of urban culture by utilizing a unique form of transportation: their own hands, feet, and mind. Rooted in cosmopolitan rebellion, practitioners of parkour felt that social stigma attached itself to the architecture. They saw infrastructure as a way to control the masses and evidence of increasing socioeconomic division. For example, the floor level a family or individual lived on was often evident of their social status. These architects—under the rule of higher classes—facilitated it. Traceurs retali-

ated with the practice of parkour as a peaceful expression of their reclaim of social control. They organized combat against these systemized methods of movement through their environment.

Parkour also held a political purpose. During an era of “high-profile riots and revolts,” the French suburbs served as centers for “40 years of intensive governmental policies” (Guss). These areas of political reform were often described as “badlands,” spatially isolated in order to control areas with “problematic populations” (Guss). This surveillance and repression of Parisian politics continued throughout the 1960s and even into the late 1990s. Political upheaval combined with increasing societal divisions caused Parisian inhabitants to feel trapped by poverty and spatial stigma. As a result, many felt “alienated and disempowered” because of the suburb’s marginalization and lack of integration (Guss 75). Guss defines these underlying feelings as “territorial stigmatisation,” which affected interactions with community members, as well as police and street-level bureaucracies. Parkour, therefore, allowed an escape from these feelings of claustrophobia through spatial reappropriation. Parkour allowed them to feel more empowered through dangerous, and often life-threatening situations. This fight against the city and social hierarchy was combatted as a struggle within themselves.

Although parkour may be viewed as a conceptual form

of resistance, it also carried a sense of individual, tangible meaning for each traceur. Sophie Fuggle, author of “Discourses of Subversion: The Ethics and Aesthetics of Capoeira and Parkour,” suggests that parkour aimed to “inscribe individual, subversive rhythms against the more collective uniform rhythms of everyday city life” (Fuggle 219). The main intention is to “disrupt and challenge usage” (Fuggle 219). Traceurs practiced their own individual rhythm, utilizing public space and infrastructure in ways unlike the rest of Paris.

Therefore, to practice parkour is to go against the normality of social convention. Like David Belle, Fuggle views parkour as an expression of individual strength and self-sufficiency. They believe that parkour creates autonomy. By solely relying on their own mind and body, they feel confident in themselves and in their training. Parkour brings power back to the individual, while creating a deep sense of liberation within the traceur community. It empowers them, whether it’s against one’s own individual struggle or economical and hierarchical struggle of a larger scale. Ironically, the physical danger from parkour eases their minds, providing a peaceful sense of emancipation from architecture’s controlling properties.

Traceurs formed their own individual meaning from the power of architecture and channelled that energy toward a new perception of Paris. According to Matthew Lamb, from Bowling Green State University, the population perceives truth as a “result of a process of the struggle between individuals interlocked in

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material and discursive social relationships” (49). Our social relations, in part, determine our level of power in society. Lamb further states that the truth about “urban space is performed and reiterated through the built environment” (50). Although parkour originated from dissent against the architects and the oppressive higher class, it ultimately serves as a way for traceurs to construct their own reality and identity. Sophie Fuggle relates to this concept, stating that parkour “locates subjectivity in one’s specific engagement in the world” (214). Their identity forms by how they relate to their surroundings.

In the same way, traceurs gain their own meaning of themselves and their urban environment from their interactions through parkour. “The traceur does not simply confirm the (quite literally) concrete presence of architecture structures, but reaffirms this presence, changing the very identity of such structures” (Fuggle 214-15).

For example, when a traceur scales the wall of a building rather than use the stairs inside, they see the building from areas and viewpoints largely unseen. By doing this, they alter the literal function of the object. Fuggle illustrates another example when she states, “The use of a window sill as a foot-hold or hand-rail as a launchpad both affirms and challenges the established identities of such items” (215). Since traceurs display these life-threatening jumps and acrobatics

in a public forum, they seek to change the perception of architecture as well as how others perceive them.

These acts also serve as a message to the public. Spectators of parkour watch in amazement as traceurs scale buildings and swing from railings with ease. It serves as a public affair, and involves not solely the practitioners of this elite art form, but society as a whole. Like the people who actually practice it, onlookers can gather their own individual interpretation of the purpose behind parkour. They perform an arguable art form that is far from normal. Going against the grain and normality of social convention, traceurs shock their audiences. The 1970s Parisian public must have formed a judgment of the traceurs when they jumped from ledges and other dangerous terrain. Perhaps it made them question their own perceptions of public space and its effect on their daily lives that would otherwise remain unnoticed.

The purpose of parkour as Parisian cultural dissent holds varying perspectives, but one overlying idea remains: every traceur

gains meaning from public space. They see architecture as a shaper of behavior and influencer of society. On the other hand, these areas of architecture also increase opportunities for participation in communal activity. They encourage growth of public life. They serve as a place where everyone can come together in mutual enjoyment.

Although park-



our is an art form that has evolved and is still practiced today, an understanding of these overlying concepts and philosophies behind parkour can diagnose its role as cultural dissent in 1970s Paris. For the Parisian suburban youth, public space and metropolis architecture carried a social, economic, political, and oppressive agenda. They were a group of cultural dissenters, dissatisfied with society's view of the purpose of public space. They sought to change the Parisian perception of the world around them. Although they didn't make any type of structural change, they were able to alter their own frame of understanding. Through parkour, they were able to overcome any type of psychological struggle.

So what is the relationship between the abstract idea of power and concrete practice of parkour? Traceurs question and test the boundaries of their abilities; and when their physical abilities surpass their expectations, it may lead to an increase in self-esteem and self-worth. During this era of social unrest in Paris, traceurs often belonged to the lower, working class of adolescent males. Upper society made them feel unworthy of indulgences, unworthy of upward social mobility, and unworthy of city life and its corporate skyscrapers. They lost faith in the capitalist cityscape; so they regained faith in themselves.

There is a close relationship between power, parkour, and freedom. Belle and other traceurs created parkour in Paris as a response to the constraints of the city imposed by those who "possess power over those who do not" (Lamb 41). However, power itself is relative. The level of perceived power changes depending on one's own self-awareness or recognition of one's position in society. Fuggle offers that parkour even "constitutes an ethical dimension" (Fuggle 219). It helped them restore and engender a faith in the world. Although their surroundings weren't ideal, traceurs reimaged and accepted its

faults. Through this, they reached higher ground both literally and metaphorically.

During the last half of the 20th century, practitioners of parkour interpreted Parisian architecture and public space as means of negative social control. The parkour movement has evolved in meaning, but still holds fundamental principles from its original creation. Both an individualized and a public form of rebellion and meditation for traceurs, parkour challenges the dominant ideologies behind the public arena and city infrastructure. Traceurs in the 1970s viewed the disciplinary power in Paris as a way to hierarchize, homogenize, and even normalize the city. Parkour helped them cope by providing individual liberation from society's controlling and restrictive elements. Now practiced globally, traceurs liberate themselves from conventional ways of movement and gain empowerment over virtually every type of struggle in life.

Works Cited

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