

# A phenomenological study of the alternative appropriation of urban space by parkour practitioners

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**ABSTRACT:** Parkour is an urban sport where practitioners utilize natural body movements such as running, jumping, and climbing to overcome obstacles in the urban environment efficiently and creatively. This phenomenological study investigates parkour practitioners and their alternative appropriations of urban space, defining the essence of their lived experiences. Utilizing the interview as the primary data collection method, parkour practitioners throughout the Midwest were questioned to define the essence of their collective lived experiences. The purpose of this study is to understand the contemporary perspective through which parkour practitioners view and experience the urban environment to contribute to the conversation between architecture, parkour, and urban space. The significance of this study is to understand this emerging usage of the city, identifying which urban conditions facilitate these movements, informing designers of which qualities and conditions in the city make these appropriations possible so that they may effectively incorporate this type of expression into urban spaces. Employing a qualitative phenomenological research methodology that is built upon the writings of Lefebvre, Borden, Merleau-Ponty, Pallasmaa, Serres, Latour, Angel, Csikszentmihalyi, and Lamb, this investigation addresses the main research question: What defines the essence of the lived experience that parkour practitioners have when they alternatively appropriate urban space? An important outcome of this study was the identification of certain urban conditions and elements which make urban spaces more ideal for parkour movements. Designers can utilize these examples to successfully incorporate the movements of parkour practitioners into urban spaces, giving them a multiplicity of different uses which go beyond their normative functions, expanding provided social functionality. Understanding this alternative perspective that parkour practitioners have on the function of urban space has the potential to redefine how these spaces are fundamentally considered, understood, and conceived by designers and how these spaces are perceived, utilized, and experienced by urban communities.

**KEYWORDS:** Alternative, Appropriation, Parkour, Phenomenology, Urban Space

## INTRODUCTION

Parkour is a sport practiced in urban space. It is a movement art that emphasizes self-improvement and progression of abilities, teaching practitioners how to overcome obstacles, both physical and mental, efficiently and creatively. Utilizing natural movements such as running, jumping, and climbing, parkour practitioners explore their cities and their potential, using creativity and their training to move themselves through space. Parkour also deals with the processes of the mind to overcome the boundaries and obstacles in one's own thoughts, constantly questioning, changing, and reestablishing the perceived limitations and capabilities of one's own body. Parkour was initially established in Lisses, France in 1988 by David Belle, who learned a similar military discipline of movement from his father, which was utilized by the French Special Forces called *le parcours du combattant* (Lawrence 2006). *Parcours du combattant* is a military training discipline that teaches soldiers how to quickly navigate obstacle courses. The intention of requiring soldiers to practice navigating these obstacle courses was to prepare them for the physical requirements of active duty, preparing them for maneuvering in live combat situations, for navigating burning buildings, and for navigating submarines that have become disoriented underwater (WFPPF). Belle established the present day sport of Parkour by adapting his father's training techniques to the urban landscape of the city. David Belle defines parkour as:

A way of adapting to the environment around you, performed on all types of architecture. It's working on techniques through physical training to get over obstacles (Belle 2011).

A practitioner of parkour came to be referred to as a *Traceur*, a French term meaning 'one who traces a path'. Parkour, from its founding in Lisses, was always about overcoming challenges. The challenges that traceurs struggle, both physically and mentally, to overcome are created by urban spaces and objects in the city and are discovered through the traceur's unique alternative perspective of the urban environment.

Parkour originated as a non-competitive practice, focusing on the progression of one's own abilities. It is not about competition with other practitioners or about winning, but about one's own external, physical struggle for the advancement of their bodily movement abilities, and one's own internal, mental battle against their perceived limitations in movement. When practicing, parkour practitioners will typically repeat the same movement many times in succession to increase both their mental comfort with the action and the familiarity of the movement to the body, honing their precision and control of both body and mind. The practice usually

occurs in short, episodic moments of appropriation in an urban landscape, which are typically repeated several times until the satisfaction of smooth, precise, and controlled movement is achieved. Parkour has a roughly established set of movements that have been categorized by practitioners of the sport over time. This index of movements includes types of actions such as jumps, vaults, leaps, flips, rolls, grabs, hangs, and steps. The movements in parkour were established based upon the interaction of the body with different spatial conditions found in the city, resulting in the roughly established global terminology for these movements. These movements are often executed in succession, which is referred to as a *line*, where the traceur performs several movements, one after another, in an urban space in one continuous action. While the established list of movements has been generally accepted by all practitioners of the sport, the list is fluid and open to interpretation by the traceur. Traceurs may add their own unique twist to certain movements or even discover a new bodily movement that has not been conceived of yet, adding another move to the index of the discipline. This fluidity and individuality of style in the practice of parkour leaves ample room for creativity to flourish. The ways in which parkour practitioners perceive and interact with the city creates a new perspective from which we can understand urban spaces, and uncovers new potential in the utilization of urban environments. Parkour, architecture, and urban space are inextricably connected, so it is important to understand how these practices interrelate and how they can influence each other.

### 1.0 PERCEIVING URBAN SPACE FROM AN ALTERNATIVE PERSPECTIVE

In order to identify movement opportunities and challenges in urban spaces, traceurs must develop what they call *parkour vision*. Parkour vision refers to the perspective that traceurs have when they observe urban spaces, identifying opportunities for alternative appropriations of those spaces for parkour movements.

With parkour vision, you don't have to follow the prescribed route, you have options, you can kick off a wall and grab another wall and climb up...It gives us options and ways for us to see space differently (Lamb 2014).

A traceur learns to see the city from this perspective by regularly practicing parkour in urban spaces, helping them get an idea of which movements they are capable of executing and which urban conditions provide the opportunities for those movements. Traceurs who participated in this study expressed that they not only developed parkour vision through their training, but also developed better spatial awareness, a greater appreciation for architecture, a sense of value for all of the spaces of the city, a better relationship with physical objects, and a better understanding of heights, distances, materials, and textures. Through their tactile interactions with space, traceurs augment their visual understanding of space by extension. Pallasmaa explains that:

All the senses, including vision, are extensions of the tactile sense; the sense organs are specializations of skin tissue, and all sensory experiences are modes of touching, both literally and metaphorically, and thus related to tactility. Our contact with the world takes place at the boundary line of the experiential self through specialized parts of our enveloping membrane (Pallasmaa 2014).

It is through this movement that traceurs gain a fuller understanding, experience, and appreciation for the city, because "for a perception to take place, continuous movements and adjustments are necessary" (Latour 2005, 169). The most fundamental level required is the movement of the eye, scanning, observing the world, collecting data. From this initial stage, the perceptions of the eye are reinforced, strengthened, and further investigated through the movement of the body;

We have to commit to a new movement of exploration in order to verify the overall quality of all the links (Latour 2013, 460).

We cannot express [space's] relation to ourselves in any other way than by imagining that we are in motion, measuring the length, width, and depth, or by attributing to the static lines, surfaces, and volumes the movement that our eyes and our kinesthetic sensations suggest to us, even though we survey the dimensions while standing still. The spatial construct is a human creation and cannot confront the creative or appreciative subject as if it were a cold, crystalized form (Borden 2001, 106, referencing Schmarsow 1893).

The collective experience and perception established by the combined movement of the eyes, body, and physical interaction with space through the skin verifies and reinforces one's observations and perceptions of the city.

The less we just stare at the hammer-thing, and the more we seize hold of it and use it, the more primordial does our relationship to it become, and the more unveiledly is it encountered as that which it is – as tool (Heidegger, 1962).

By physically interacting with materials and objects through touch, as well as moving their bodies through space, traceurs learn about their environment in greater detail, developing a deeper relationship with the city, which translates to additional degrees of information that are recognized during visual observations of urban space. Through their physical and mental interactions with space in these alternative ways, traceurs learn to experience the city in a fuller way, transforming their experience from passively moving through the city to an active engagement with it.

For traceurs, they do not envision a city in the same way that a typical person would imagine it, concerned with street names, shopping locations, parking, public transportation services, and food vendors. Traceurs do not envision urban space as a totality on a macro scale; they are instead transfixed on the micro-

conditions created by the architecture of the urban environment as a series of spaces and opportunities to physically engage with through alternative appropriations. They are concerned with very specific, localized elements within the urban fabric. Traceurs will often exclaim that the city is their playground, because they see the city as a uniformly endless series of unlimited possibilities for movement and play. They are concerned with the holistic sensorial experience of space through physical interaction, play, and exploration. Traceurs experience urban space in a more complete way, utilizing a variety of senses to develop intimate relationships with the objects, materials, and textures of the city. They experience the city in episodic moments of appropriation, employing sensory and cognitive mapping through their physical interactions with space.

## 2.0 THE PHENOMENOLOGY OF FLOW STATE

A flow state is a state of being where one is completely focused on, and absorbed in, the work they are currently engaged with. Flow states can be achieved in almost any type of work or activity. In parkour, flow state is often achieved during the execution of parkour movements or lines. Theorist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi explains that flow happens:

When a person's body or mind is stretched to its limits in a voluntary effort to accomplish something difficult and worthwhile (Csikszentmihalyi 2009).

It is likely that one will enter almost automatically into a flow state effortlessly and spontaneously while performing a task (Csikszentmihalyi 2009). This is precisely the situation which traceurs are often engaged in, faced with great physical and mental challenges that require tremendous mental focus to execute successfully. It is more likely that a person will enter into flow when a high amount of skill is needed to complete a task and when there are high levels of challenge present (Csikszentmihalyi 2009). The interviewees were asked to describe their experience of alternative appropriations of urban space in situations where they were training movements at the edge of, or even slightly beyond, their perceived skill level. It is during these training sessions requiring extreme focus and concentration when traceurs described that they most commonly entered into a flow state (Fig. 1, Fig. 2).

When asked to describe their experience of being in a flow state while executing parkour movements in urban spaces, traceurs described their sense of self stepping away as they metaphorically fell into their movements, letting their bodies and training take over.

When you get to that zone, your body and your mind has to enter a state that's less and less thought or analytically oriented, and you kind of have to get out of that intellectualization of what you're doing and kind of let your body take over. I think that is one of the things that triggers Flow State...I think parkour, more than a lot of other sports activities, can induce that, and I think that's one of the reasons why it's so attractive (Graves, Group Interview 1).

You're so focused on the actual movement that there is no process of thinking about it. The training takes over...That's when that sense of self steps back...For that moment while you are doing the jump, there wasn't an I...The body is kind of leading because it happens so fast that it has to be training, it has to be reflexive (Joe Torchia, Paired Interview 1).

During their experience, the interviewees described that this sense of self steps back while the body takes over, and upon completion of the movements, the self steps back into place, changed slightly through the process. Providing further insight into this retraction and reintroduction of the sense of self, Angel explains that:

Parkour is an activity that allows participants to experience the 'flow' state, one that involves a letting go of the sense of self, then experiencing a re-enforced sense of self after an activity that involves entering the flow state has occurred (Angel 2011).

Through their experience of alternative appropriations of urban space, traceurs lose their sense of self temporarily, only to have it return in a more solidified form, reinforcing their identity through movement and overcoming challenges. This change that traceurs experience through their movements:

Is tied up not just with the re-perception and subsequent alternative use of space, but [also with] the nature of the challenge experienced in parkour and developing the skills to exercise control in difficult situations (Angel 2011).

Because traceurs must break jumps by overcoming fear and hesitation in order to commit to certain movements and complete challenges, they become transformed through the crucibles of their experiences. These experiences alter their identities, however slightly, and gradually prepare traceurs for other similar situations they may encounter apart from the practice of parkour, teaching them how to face fear, overcome hesitation, and commit to movement, physically, mentally, and situationally throughout life.

During this experience of alternative appropriation of urban space, traceurs expressed that they felt a sense of weightlessness, power, euphoria, and freedom. Csikszentmihalyi refers to these feelings during flow state as 'ecstasy', which he describes as a mental state which can be identified by the sense that one is no longer taking part in everyday routines, but stepping out of them into an alternate reality (Csikszentmihalyi 2009). This experience of ecstasy can be an intense experience where one may feel almost as if they themselves do not exist while in this flow state (Csikszentmihalyi 2009). This phenomenon of the feeling of the non-existence of the self is exactly what the traceurs described during their experiences when they alternatively appropriate urban space. Because of their intense focus on their movements, there is no room left for conscious thoughts relating to the self or the body. When a person is involved in a task that is fully

engaging, they have little attention left to dedicate to the awareness of bodily feelings or notions of the self; their identity disappears from conscious thought (Csikszentmihalyi 2009). Because the task requires extreme concentration and focus, the mind cannot simultaneously feel and be aware of one's own existence, and therefore those feelings of the self and of existence temporarily cease (Csikszentmihalyi 2009). For traceurs, the intense focus and concentration required to overcome difficult physical challenges when alternatively appropriating urban space causes them to lose their feelings of the self in their efforts, entering a flow state where they experience this ecstasy and euphoria.

This experience of being in flow is described by Csikszentmihalyi as having several common feelings associated with that mode of being. When in flow state, one is completely enveloped in what they are doing, focusing and concentrating on the task at hand, experiencing ecstasy in the process (Csikszentmihalyi 2009). In this mode of being, one knows exactly which actions must be taken to complete the work, and this knowledge comes from the high level of skill that one possesses, which provides confidence in knowing that the task is possible (Csikszentmihalyi 2009). Also present in this experience is, again, this notion of the self dropping away, a feeling of becoming part of something larger (Csikszentmihalyi 2009). Additionally, through this intense focus on the task at hand and on the present moment, the experience of timelessness is another commonly reported feeling during flow (Csikszentmihalyi 2009). This idea of timelessness and intense focus on the present moment was reciprocated by the interviewees when describing their experience of alternative appropriation of urban space. During this experience, the traceur is fully engaged in the present moment, focused on every movement and obstacle as they come to them; they are focusing on the present moment and not on the next move or on the end result.

"Take each step as it comes. Execute each step perfectly, but only the one you're doing now. Don't try and think ahead to doing the next one perfectly, do the one right now." And that's literally each step after step. That is why I think, part of why there's this feeling of calmness and flow, because even though you've accepted the end result, you're not looking at it. Each step comes and you take it and you do each step perfectly (Foster quoting Daniel Ilabaca, Individual Interview 1).

In this flow state, their thoughts are entirely focused on the present moment when the mind steps back and the body and the training take over. Lastly, this state of flow offers intrinsic motivation, and becomes rewarding in itself (Csikszentmihalyi 2009). As the traceurs described, this state of flow during their experience of urban space provides them with feelings of euphoria and is intrinsically rewarding. Through engaging with, and overcoming, challenges and experiencing this flow state, traceurs feel a great sense of happiness and satisfaction through their alternative appropriations of urban space.



Figure 1: Paige executing precision jump, Kent State University Campus, Kent, OH (Author 2016)



Figure 2: Wolfe executing strides to precision jump, Kent State University Campus, Kent, OH (Author 2016)

### 3.0 DESIGNING FOR ALTERNATIVE APPROPRIATION

In order to find locations that are suitable for practicing parkour movements, the traceurs interviewed for this study identified certain ideal physical conditions within urban spaces that they seek out. Ideal physical conditions for a suitable training area include elements such as thin low walls, suspended metal bars, multilevel sturdy platforming, railings, small square or circular objects, high walls made of a hard material, accessibility ramping structures, stairs and stairwells, tables, benches, trees, terrain variations, corners, and ledges (Fig. 3). Several of these conditions were identified prior to the interviews through a collective visual analysis of many parkour locations taken from online parkour forums, reaffirming these specified ideal conditions. In addition to these physical obstacles, the traceurs also identified other conditions of urban spaces which make them ideal for parkour movements including having many obstacles in close proximity, a less crowded area, good texture and grip on surfaces, sturdily built objects, older and dirtier appearance to the space, and a spot that is considered public space.

To make spaces more suitable for parkour movements, these elements can be included in public urban space designs. An ideal parkour location should have several of these objects concentrated in an area where they are in close proximity with varying distances between objects, ranging from one to fifteen feet. These objects within the space should be constructed out of durable, textured material that has good grip for hands and shoes and is not easily damaged or marked up, such as stone, cement, rock, concrete, wood, or brick, all with rough rather than smooth textures to improve grip. The objects should be securely constructed, ensuring they do not shift or fall apart so that traceurs are less likely to injure themselves or damage the space. The objects in the space should also be specified to handle certain loads that would be applied to them through parkour movements, including impact load forces, pulling forces, and pushing forces. Most importantly, ideal parkour spaces should be public spaces that are designed and intended for pedestrian use.

The type of alternative appropriation of urban space that traceurs engage in is rarely understood or acknowledged by designers of urban spaces in the United States. Because this type of space usage has only recently begun to occur in the United States, urban spaces have not been designed in a way that is mindful of this type of space usage. As parkour grows and becomes increasingly popular, the phenomenon of this type of alternative appropriation will become increasingly common as well, and designers will need to start taking this type of space usage into consideration when designing urban public space. In order to effectively and mindfully accommodate for this type of alternative appropriation of urban space by traceurs, designers can incorporate some of the elements, objects, layouts, materialities, and conditions which the interviewees identified into urban spaces that allow for these appropriations.

Designer and theorist Juhani Pallasmaa emphasizes the importance of creating a sensory experience of architecture for the user, denouncing the surfacial nature of ocularcentrism (Pallasmaa 2014). Ocularcentrism can be described as a solely ocular focus when designing space, prioritizing the design of visual stimuli while, as a result, depriving the other senses of experiences or perceptions (Pallasmaa 2014). Pallasmaa argues that through this focus on visual stimuli in design, architecture is not experienced in a way that is as complete because of the sensory deprivation that ocularcentrism creates (Pallasmaa 2014). Lefebvre maintains similar thoughts, concluding that:

Modern architectural space tends to concentrate on the visual, on objects and surfaces, ignoring the space of the body (Lefebvre 1992, 200).

By designing urban spaces that welcome physical interaction, touch, movement, and play, communities in cities can once again utilize all of their senses when experiencing space rather than just prioritizing visual stimuli.

Space-production cannot...be reduced to theories of it, but must be seen as a process involving not only theories but also practices, objects, ideas, imagination, and experience (Borden 2001, 11, referencing Lefebvre).

All of these elements are important components in conceiving and designing successful, functional urban environments. This space for expression, movement, and difference is what gives people a sense of freedom, community, and relief from the stresses of the city, providing space in which they can further define their identity.

The architecture of the city can be the means by which social relations are constructed. Practices such as skateboarding therefore suggest not only the redistribution of urban space according to the maxim 'to each according to his needs', but also the reformulation of the self according to the physical potential of the built environment (Borden 2001, 243, referencing Lefebvre).

Through designing urban public spaces that can be utilized for parkour movements, the creation of spaces that encourage physical intimacy and interaction which provide room for freedom of physical expression can be accomplished.

Pallasmaa argues that because of this trend towards a heavy focus on design for visual stimulation, our visual sense is becoming detached from our other senses, depriving us of a complete, fuller experience of architecture and allowing for no emotional dialogue with space (Pallasmaa 2014). To provide the conditions which generate this fuller experience of space, architects can choose to create spaces that encourage both visual and physical interaction through their design choices, because:

The way that...spaces are set up will inform, or give us an expectation of, how we're supposed to interact with them (Lamb 2014).

Through their designs, architects typically have premeditated intentions about how they envision a space to function, where people are supposed to walk, look, and sit.

These spaces are designed intentionally to give us experiences, or designed to elicit certain experiences from us (Lamb 2014).

These planned choices about space are expressed and communicated through the physical manifestations of their intentions in the built environment. People are aware of, and often follow, these designed architectural cues that guide them through space, directing them and informing them what to do and how to behave.

Architecture communicates to us just as it communicates to the traceur, it will communicate expected behaviors (Lamb 2014).

In an identical process, architecture communicates to the traceur which movements the space is providing for, encouraging them to alternatively appropriate it in certain ways.

Traceurs have a very intimate relationship with space and architecture, the reason being is that they are connected to it, corporeally they are connected to it, they feel it, they're in it, and they work with it.

Architecture communicates to them the types of moves and types of behaviors that it will require for them to move through that environment (Lamb 2014).

Certain obstacles, materials, layouts, and spacings when filtered through the ability of the traceur can signify through parkour vision which types of movement challenges the space affords.

By choosing to design space with this type of physical engagement in mind, architects can provide for and encourage people to experience space on a more intimate level. Through designing space in ways that intentionally incorporate physical interactions involving the totality of the senses, the alternative ways in which traceurs appropriate space will become increasingly known, and:

The more we experience these interactions, the more it develops a value or an expectation of behavior (Lamb 2014).

When the designs of the spaces begin to conceptually support physical interaction with the urban environment similar to the ways which traceurs engage it, their alternative appropriations become more acceptable and understandable in public perception.

Currently in the United States, because there are very few, if any, public spaces designed for the alternative appropriations of traceurs, public spaces that are suitable for this type of movement already exist and are utilized by traceurs. This means that the requirements of a decent parkour spot are nothing drastically different from existing spaces. But by mindfully incorporating these slight changes when designing urban spaces, the ways that traceurs use the city can be brought into the intended scope of usage for these spaces. Following these guidelines, parkour can be successfully incorporated into any new or existing public space.

"Fifty percent of our population currently lives in an urban environment, and in thirty-five years, that is going to jump to seventy-five percent" so clearly we need to reevaluate or think differently or change our points of view about how we can use urban space and what sorts of things we can do differently with space" (Lamb 2014, referencing Gumpert).

By designing spaces and objects with multiplicity of use as opposed to singular usages, urban spaces become dynamic, interactive, inclusive, multipurpose environments, providing room for a plethora of different activities and forms of self-expression, increasing the potential social services they can provide for local urban communities.

Architects and city planners have only very recently begun to consider and discuss the implications of a conversation about the intersections and interactions of parkour, architecture, and urban design. Bjarke Ingels, a Danish architect from Copenhagen, engaged in conversation with members of Team JiYo, a widely known parkour group also from Copenhagen, in a documentary created by Team JiYo titled *My Playground*. In the dialogue, Ingels expressed that "there is an overlap of what we are doing and what you are doing" (*My Playground*, Ingels 2009). He explains how "architecture is the art of creating the setting for human life" and that "architecture in the means and the goal is the maximum evolvment of human life" (*My Playground*, Ingels 2009). Through architectural design, Ingels is "trying to bureaucratically plan it, whereas Team JiYo is just doing it guerilla style" (*My Playground*, Ingels 2009). Many of the buildings designed by Bjarke Ingels Group challenge or defy the traditional conventions of architecture similar to the ways that parkour challenges the traditional functions of urban spaces and saturates them with new potential. Klaus Bondam, the Mayor of Technical and Environmental Administration in Copenhagen, explains that he likes:

To see that the spaces in the city are being used, because that is what they are there for. There is no doubt that if there is a lot of positive behavior in our city's space, then that behavior will take the positive power within that city space and get many more people in that city space with positive behavior, which is certainly something that parkour can contribute to, because it gives us something to look at (*My Playground*, Bondam 2009).

The positive energy and spectacle of parkour has the potential to reinvigorate city spaces by creating an invitation for others in the local community to either watch or take part in the spectacle and event that parkour creates. Signe Hojbjerre, a member of the Team JiYo parkour team, explains how:

When you show that you look at the urban space and value it in a certain way, and when other people see that and also value it, it then becomes even bigger, and becomes a way of creating your own identity (*My Playground*, Hojbjerre 2009).

Defining and understanding the essence of this perspective through which traceurs view and utilize urban space, and incorporating this new perspective in the designed spectrum of usage for these spaces, could create more evocative, engaging, community spaces.

Lastly, the underutilization of certain areas of urban spaces can be ameliorated by taking into consideration this new perspective when designing *left over* space within cities. Often times there are areas of the city which are underutilized that can result from certain urban planning design implementations or from the necessary elements of a city which are not perceived as suitable for public space, such as alleyways, backsides of buildings, and service areas. It is often in these underutilized, unattractive, left over spaces of the city where traceurs find opportunities for movement, creativity, and play. Through the perspective of the traceur, all spaces of the city contain value and potential, providing these underutilized areas with usage possibilities. In Copenhagen, the Danish architectural design firm Kragh and Berglund created a project called Plug N Play which uses parkour as a means to give value and usage to planned building sites prior to the start of construction. They designed and implemented temporary sport parks in these cleared building sites, placing designed parkour equipment in this area for practitioners to use while the lots were sitting vacant, unused, waiting for construction to begin. Upon the start of construction, the sporting parks are removed and placed in new locations, temporarily imbuing these would-be useless areas of vacant city property with value and usage through parkour and other sports. Through the practice of parkour, all of these underutilized spaces of the city are once again given value through the perspective that traceurs have on urban space and the ways in which they alternatively appropriate them for their use.



Figure 3: Multilevel Sturdy Platforming, High Walls made of Hard Material, Stairs, Dirtier Appearance, Many Obstacles in a Close Proximity, Grand Fountain, Flint, MI (Author 2016)

## CONCLUSION

Architects, designers, and urban planners currently design for the normative usage of urban spaces. But the innovative, contemporary ways through which parkour practitioners alternatively appropriate and interact with urban space to encourage creativity and play have yet to be introduced into the range of perspectives through which urban spaces are designed and understood by these professions. Traceurs, through their unique appropriations of space, do not simply observe and walk through urban spaces. They physically engage their environment, transforming these normative, bland social spaces into engaging, dynamic, repurposed, and interesting spaces where interaction, exploration, play, and creativity thrive.

In order to generate a meaningful, effective, substantive conversation between parkour and architecture, it is necessary to first establish parkour, and the experience that traceurs have when they appropriate urban space, in a framework of research. This inquiry aims to uncover and define the essence of the lived experience of what it is to perform parkour movements in urban spaces, the essence of the experienced relationship between parkour practitioners and urban spaces when they are performing movements. The purpose and intention of this phenomenological study is to define the phenomenon of alternative appropriation of urban space by parkour practitioners with the larger objective of contributing to the framework through which a conversation between parkour and architecture can continue to develop.

Conceiving of urban spaces through this new perspective that parkour practitioners have experienced is a completely different viewpoint for designers to consider when envisioning the functions of urban spaces within the city. It is important to define how this new perspective relates to architecture and to understand what impacts this new perspective could have on the design and function of current and future urban space. The normative urban public spaces, typically parks of grass, trees, and benches used primarily for walking and sitting, are transformed into immersive, sensuous, interactive, phenomenologically engaging social spaces when traceurs alternatively appropriate them through their movements.

Through the perspective of the traceur, one is able to visualize both the possibilities for use and the value in all spaces of the city. Designing with this perspective in mind, that of the traceur and their appropriation of space through alternative use, could result in spaces that generate greater community engagement and positive social activity. Exploring and defining the essence of this new perspective and experience that traceurs have concerning both urban space and the city is essential to understanding the possible future developments and evolutions of the functions of urban spaces. As Bjarke Ingels explains, as architects:

Our intention is to open up for more possibilities, and then it's great if the city and buildings meet what wasn't expected, the unforeseen, the spontaneous, what's coming. Life in the city is always evolving and it is our job as architects to make sure that our opportunities for expression aren't limited, but that our cities match the life we want to live (*My Playground*, Ingels 2009).

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