11. Conditional Generosity:

Architecture for the subvert, Gerlev parkour park

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Abstract

To act generously is to act with kindness. It is an expression of care often acted out as a selfless donation. This donation is often accompanied by an assumption that the recipient will utilise the gift in a way that the donor would condone. This paper presents a situation where a relatively new type of engagement with the public was generously granted permission to erect a park for unveiling and developing its qualities by participating in civil life at the cost of normalization. The type of novel engagement with the civic presented herein is parkour.

Most recently the parkour community erected a parkour-facility in Gerlev, Denmark. This paper analyses how this articulation of generosity can be seen as a response to the debates on parkour and its inclusion into the normativity of the civic. This paper presents the developing architectural language which was deployed on-site as one which is approaching parkour in a novel way, and one which asks the free-runners to conform to the designers' intent. The act of design herein showcases that generosity needn't be a signifier of the giving and the needy and the boundary between the beneficiary and the donor is not always clear.

Introduction

It can be said that acts of generosity are followed by a certain expectation of reciprocity. This reciprocation needn't be a gift in return matching the abundance of the initial donation - a certain expression of gratitude would suffice or expression of will to act in response to the donation in a way that the donor would condone. This expectation may be somewhat naïve but gives form to the enactment of generosity and allows it to become a binding exercise; a tool in building a common social nexus through a sense of obligation. Marcel Maus describes such moments of exchange when he formulates his analysis of gifts as mechanisms operating in even the most primitive societies[1].

At the same time, it mustn't be assumed that this is always the case and that generosity is purely a social device that precludes selfless acts of care and desire to help. It is often acted out to remedy awkward *deficiencies* or state of *lacking* (understood as a sense of need) which prevent the attainment of expected social goals. Giles Deleuze and Félix Guattari reflect on this social idea of deficiencies and write that '[l]ack (manqué) is created, planned, and organised in and through social production […] It is lack that infiltrates itself, creates empty spaces or vacuoles, and propagates itself in accordance with the organisation of an already existing organisation of production'[2]. If generosity is intertwined with this understanding of *lack* it would then follow that it can function to fill the socially produced vacuoles and perpetuate a sense of gregariousness or dependency. Facing these modalities of production these expectations to fill the vacuoles suggests that social acts of exchange should be contingent on our succinct definition of *lack* and as such they need a similarly succinct focus to be apparently satisfied. To refer back to Deleuze and Guattari:

> There is no society that does not arrange lack in this midst, by varitable means peculiar to it. […] This welding of desire to lack is precisely what gives desire collective and personal ends, goals or intentions – instead of desire taken in the real order of its production, which behaves as a molecular phenomenon devoid of any goal or intention[3].

This chapter discusses an act of including the subculture of parkour runners or traceurs (that originated from the context and principles of *lack* and subversion) into the expectations and abundance of civic life. The focus of this chapter is the parkour park in Gerlev, Denmark which was designed to fill the vacuole of parkour classes. The enactment of generosity in the architecture of Gerlev park can be understood as associated with an unspoken expectation of a certain type of reciprocity to a kind donation that is unwritten but comes to complement the social contract. This is to say that generosity, in this case, came with an implicit condition (placed on the beneficiary) which asks that the 'donated' architecture be used in a way which the donor condones. This condition finds its representation in the way the organisation of space was designed. I argue here that following the acceptance of parkour into civil life the park's designers reinterpreted the dissident qualities of parkour and re-articulated it as an act which is more civic in quality. In this form, rather than challenging the principles of *abundance, deficiency* and *lacking* parkour can support the construct of civility. This is to say that the deliberate design and erection of the park is a sign of the natural progression and maturation of parkour following the pressures to build a shared community.

This chapter is based on an analysis of the presence of parkour in the civic debate guided by the writing of Giles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, in particular *Anti-Oedipus[4]*. This text is divided into two main sections; the first provides the definition of parkour and a spatial analysis of the conduct as described in literature; the second presents the particularities of Gerlev park. Throughout the text I will be referring to Deleuzo-Guattarian theories showing that there are inescapable parallels between the game and a Deleuzean definition of non-essentialist desire.

Parkour

The game of parkour originated from an approach to training that advocated natural movement and was incorporated into the Parisian suburbs (Lisses, Evry and Sarcelles) around 1988[5]. Erwan Le Corre links parkour to George Hébert's philosophy of military training that advocated 'the natural method'[6]. The practice was initiated by a group of young men including David Belle and Sébastien Fucan as well as members of the Yamakasi group; they are credited for developing the approach into what we now know as parkour and popularising it at the outset of the millenium[7]. David Belle recalls that his father, Raymond was instrumental in setting up the practice, based on his military training and that '[w]ithout him […] Parkour would not exist'[8]. The aim of parkour is to enjoy the freedom of movement without pre-ordained cultural constructs. The loosely defined object of this game is to run from a randomly selected point 'A' on a 2-dimensional map to a similar point 'B' along a straight line in plan[9]. This often entails having to conduct impressive acrobatic jumps between obstacles difficult to get around.

According to Robert Bennett the game is unusual in the fact that it assumes no competitiveness and as such the idea of *us* vs *them* is here dissolved[10]. Bennett also stresses that the popularity and form the game was attained due to the situation of impoverished neighbourhoods it was introduced to and the fact that it required no equipment to be practiced but rather offered a respite from a dull and grey reality. Jeffrey Kidder suggests that the relation between the traceurs and civility (or at least its incarnation in economy) is one of a post-modern type; where the game actively rejects the need for commodities and at the same time grows from- and adopts a neo-liberal affect through its popularisation (via commercials) as well as language used to describe stunts[11]. Parkour demands an unconstrained relation between the traceur and their context which, may be seen as (to paraphrase Deleuze and Parnet who describe desire) 'revolutionary because it always wants more connections and assemblages'[12]. These connections may or may not be in-fitting with- or compliment the civic affect and need not have a strict definition in our understanding of civil life and run the risk of propagating non-civil assemblages. The dictate of

architectural lines and directives here means only opportunities to subvert the order. This involves breaking the expected direction of movement and routes proposed by the architects and urban planners, who (presumably) act upon what they consider representing and facilitating the orthodox way of conducting civil behaviour. The virtue of this attitude is that a description of the city for the traceur does not require hierarchical infrastructures that suggests appropriate conduct and is not repetitive in satisfying common expectations of an urban dweller.

It is, therefore, important for the traceurs to understand the capacity of their environment to assess if it can foster their movement as little about their route is pre-envisioned and can be dangerous. The traceurs' deep relationship with their context is intensified due to the fact that, as noted by Jimena Ortuzar, the relational aspect of architectural elements becomes recombined and their use is reinterpreted[13]. The traceurs, therefore, cannot rely on the safety inscribed in the design of routes proposed by the architects and sanctioned by law but need to define new boundaries of risk, ripe for their new, constantly redefined performativity. This gives a chance for parkour to be an umbrella term for acting out the impulses that are not represented in the public life but and can include acts resulting from the internal conflicts or dialogues that the traceur is dealing with. Their heart might be beating too quickly and the arms and legs might bend slightly differently; sometimes the way their organs expand and contract is ripe for the civic environment but at times it is not. Parkour, due to its uncoordinated nature embraces - and allows exploring these idiosyncrasies.

At the same time the resulting element of excitement and risk in the game[14] or its lingering origin in *lacking* prevents parkour from being accepted by many and is often defined by authorities as vandalism. Mathew Lamb mentions a sign outside of a public institution (Museum of Modern Art) in Strasburg that said: 'The practice of parkour is prohibited. [The Museum i]s a public place and cannot be held responsible in case of an accident'[15]. Any such effort to prohibit parkour is put into action to create an imagery of a safe and dignified environment, signified by a set of well-articulated and thought-through design strategies. Saying this, the game is becoming popularised through its incorporation into mainstream popular culture. Eugene Minogue, the CEO of *Parkour UK* expressed interest in 'normalising' parkour so it becomes recognised as a legitimate sport[16]. Such efforts are picked up on a global scale; examples of this include: '*District 13*'[17] - a film in which the protagonists explore the horizontality and verticality of an isolated dystopian districts of Paris. Other examples include countless Instagram and Youtube channels where young traceurs show off their skills. The discussion of the game is therefore already present in the civic space as are the traceurs (albeit without an explicit invitation).

A new home for the traceur

Once parkour was popularised it quickly developed a set of defined rituals that could be named and compose events which architectural forms can recognise, define and facilitate[18]; such was the case with skateboarding as argued by Iain Borden[19] and it would seem that it is also the case with parkour. This section presents the parkour park in Gerlev and the role it plays in forwarding the presence of traceurs as an architectural articulation of the social contract. Many of such parks opened around 2009 in Poland, UK, Denmark, and Finland. The first park recognised in literature being the Jyväskylä park[20] that presents itself with the aesthetics of what looks like an early-brutalist-revival and as Tani and Amel argue deterred social problems from its site, inviting the general public as requested by the local authorities[21] thereby adopting a socio-technical capacity.

One of the first designed spaces for parkour is the Gerlev parkour park which was erected in 2007 and enjoys the safety and legitimacy of an educational establishment. The park is part of Gerlev Idrætshøjskole located South of Slagelse in Denmark. The school was established at the outset of the 20th century where a national campaign was set up by the government to incentivise a healthy lifestyle based on sport[22].

The talented designer of the park is Martin Kallesøe from *Street Movement*. Martin practices parkour and specialises in the development of similar parkour amenities; he approached the task of designing without explicit legislative guidance that he should follow to erect such a park and this, as he claims, gave him freedom to develop an architectural form for what he calls a 'playground for adults'[23]. The form of the park addresses key issues in the development of architecture for parkour. The park does not explicitly order obedience however it could be understood that by the sheer organisation of objects in space it asks (almost by default) for a certain type of conduct.

[Fig. 11.1 Near Here]

In a sense, the park is an attempt to share the joy and excitement of acting like a traceur by inviting inexperienced *civilians* to partake. The relationship between the interiority of the park and its exteriority should, therefore, be embracive and nurturing. This condition is met by the withdrawal of the park from the street and a visual break between the two formed by a thick layer of vegetation that opens it up to the main building within the Gerlev Idrætshøjskole. The vegetation creates a safe environment to practice movements, shielding the future traceurs from

the gaze of the bystanders (who might not understand the difficulties of the stunts or the shame of initial failures associated with being a novice).

The composition of the park resembles a field where architectural elements (made of concrete and metal that traceurs can *play* with/on) are reorganised after being collected from all around a city. Two structures which inspired the composition of this collage came from two cities: London and Paris. The inspirations from London came from the underpass outside King's College London-Waterloo Campus whereas the ones that came from Paris are from La Bonne Conduite, Lisses[24].

[Fig. 11.2 Near Here]

In addition to the inspirations from the two capitals, we can also note structural openings for windows and doors as well as scaffolding constructed with pipes, seemingly scattered randomly weaving in and out of the concrete slabs on site. The obstacles in the park consist of vertical concrete slabs of different height and metal bars that serve as handles for a firm grip (see figure 11.3) **[Fig. 11.3 Near Here]**. The walls range from about two and a half to about five meters in height and most of them are unconnected apart from the main structure that is central to the composition. This central piece is composed of a right-angled ribbon (in plan) made of walls that enclose a series of spaces and provide stability for their highest elements while the part of the ribbon which is lower in height is capped with a platform. The composition comes across as a partially finished construction site, ready to be plastered and handed over to the client that ordered an architectural design to be erected. The raw quality of the detailing suggests that the aim of the design was not to present a rich and glorified image of the inhabitants or their social status. In this sense Gerlev park comes across as a stripped version of a formal architectural language, a vernacular or Brutalist approach (similar to the concrete architecture of parkour's origin in Paris), offering places to land and places to swing from and waiting for a more refined political determination of design.

The park should, however not be treated as a simplistic approach to architecture. On the contrary, it was designed with the deepest knowledge of forces acting on a structure faced with not only vertical but also lateral strain. Martin started the design of the arrangements of forms based on pre-planned stunts which were given specific names[25]. Saying this, he does also point out that there are possibilities for movements in his design which he did not pre-plan for. As he recalls the process that led him to envision the design was based on 1:1 modelmaking where he and his team tested particular spatial arrangements in real-life conditions[26]. The way the park was planned is very sophisticated; we can note a deliberately considered system of proportions and placement of

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architectural elements that responds not to static bodies, standing and stretching their limbs, but to bodies carried by momentum. In fact, a static body may feel anxious as the proportions of the structure are not adapted to a slow and controlled descent from it via, say, stairs or a ladder. One should rather fearlessly leap and jump.

The internal relations of spaces in the park were designed to imply a sequential alignment of opportunities for particular stunts. The placement of these opportunities looks as though it was developed based on a controlled set of strings linking carefully pre-planned sets of starting points (A) and destinations (B). This is linking the park to the origin of parkour from the French 'parcours du combattant'[27] (meaning obstacle course). In this way, the park becomes much like any good civic design where the architect envisioned the events their architecture is to envelop to cater appropriately. As figure 11.4 shows **[Fig. 11.4 Near Here]**, tracks are leading to short walls that are intended to be jumped over or onto. This provision is in case of bad weather which could potentially weaken bare soil and impede the capacity of the traceur to jump. Martin and his team though of movements in a linear way along a vector of momentum and events or steps that need to be taken to complete a movement based on their practice[28]. Hence, the design offers a different experience to the urban grid that is usually used by traceurs who have to imagine new routes amongst the (apparently random) developing urban tissue.

The detail-joints are simple to understand which is important for the traceurs who need to be certain that the element they interact with is robust enough to take their weight and the strain on the materiality that they plan to subject to it. The assumption of this design move is to give the traceurs the confidence to conduct a stunt. The metal handlebars, that allow a firm grip, are either static and drilled into the concrete walls or are flexible and are slid into an anchor from one side and thread through the perforation of a concrete slab on the other (as seen in figure 11.5) **[Fig. 11.5 Near Here]**. In this way, the metal rods can be adjusted and repositioned to achieve a more fitting set of ratios between elements. This design move is brilliant and inspired by Martin's experience in working in gymnastic studios, however, as he says, this detail is not altered often as people prefer to master a stunt in familiar conditions[29]. The composition of the metal elements and the body come together, engaging in an implicitly orchestrated event.

Concluding remarks

It is always difficult if not impossible to predict the impacts of any acts of creative impulse and especially architecture that is not only an example of one but also functions as a setting where other, similar impulses converge. Parkour is a revolutionary impulse and seeks new and

uncoordinated connections and assemblages[30] and as such it could grow generously within a context of *lack* and was formed by it. Saying this with public interest in the game it was included into mechanisms that reminded it of a certain type of *lack* that it should suffer from and of an architectural gift it can receive to satisfy it with. By legibly facilitating for linear, pre-planned stunts the Gerlev park is suggesting a way of thinking of parkour and preparing for a predictable and safe way of conducting it. All this to suggest vacuoles and re-produce the forms of production already operating to construct an inclusive socius infused by sport, social media and popular culture.

In a way the Gerlev park's erection embodies the generous acceptance of parkour in a civil debate following its popularisation in the early 2000's. The design of the park started from the consideration of the relation between the part of the body of the designer and a model of an architectural element. The sculptural and daring form of the park resulted from a void in the legislation which was not prepared to command the design (via the necessity of community engagement or stringent health and safety laws). The Gerlev park came to participate in the development of an architectural typology which, by the virtue of the inclusion into the site set out a series of benefits and conditions. As the architectural language becomes more established the typography of such parks will become more recognisable and standardised. We can already see elements which are repetitive across other, similar sites such as a mesh of metal rods and an assembly of concrete slabs; all organised in a linear manner.

The implicit condition outlined in the design of the park was that the architectural elements be used in a safe way that the donors condone. This use was more or less suggested in the way the architectural elements were assembled to form opportunities of use in an orderly line, supervised and under control. That is to say that in this case the game is becoming re-defined to a point, which is acceptable by the structures defining civility and the orderly organisation of cities. As such the game started showing a semblance of docilisation from its usual, uncoordinated ways to become less threatening to the civic order.

In this new form, the game presents itself with a more civic image where the joy of freedom of movement is channelled in repetitive ways. One might ask if the sensation of safety replaces the necessity of losing one's civic confidence and dissolving one's normative frontiers to develop a new endurance. It is easy to say that by this facilitation, the qualities of hesitation, and self-reflection embodied in parkour might in this case be replaced with feelings of desire for *abundance* which come with a certain sense of *deficiency* and feeling of *lack.* This might also

result in the abstraction of the conduct that allows organs, hands, and bodies to adapt to their context and prevent the release of adolescent energy trying to find its place and outlet. In this form, the game can be seen as becoming a tool to construct one's image in a standardised and repetitive way, as a desirable persona that can attract attention. From a game that requires a certain attitude to commodities and normative architectural frontiers, it is gradually becoming defined as *a sport* or an *art form* and is gaining a defined impetus fit for the commercial infrastructure in the civic space. One might be to present one's masculinity[31], strengthen one's core muscles or perhaps present oneself in a favourable or attractive light. In this form with a set of defined and expected aims, it can be said that the traceurs are seen as less subversive and are becoming much more docile, family-friendly and community-building.

This doesn't go to say that this process prohibits parkour from being a free game but the desire to build a certain type of civility together gave shape to the intent to design the park. Traceurs are still free to transide the city and even the park however they please, even without unnecessary commodities or signifiers of social status. This shows that there is a reciprocal tendency to accept parkour by some authorities and include it into the ongoing debates in a more docile form or contribute to a cohesive social construct[32]. In this shape parkour is becoming part of the producing machine of civility, condoning a certain type of *lack* in an expected way extending the virtues of a mature and caring community that can give generously.

Acknowledgements

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