

# Nice-looking obstacles: parkour as urban practice of deterritorialization

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**Abstract** Most academic publications refer to Parkour as a subversive and embodied tactic that challenges hegemonic discourses of discipline and control. Architecture becomes the playful ground where new ways to move take form. These approaches rarely address the material and embodied relations that occur in these practices and remain on the discursive plane of cultural signifiers. A theory of movement between bodies as the founding aspect of Parkour unfolds alternative concepts of body, space, time and movement beyond the discursive. Movement becomes the leitmotif for a re-conceptualization of the relations between subjects and objects and abandons their division. With the example of Parkour, I will challenge anthropocentric approaches toward embodiment and instead foreground open-ended shifting configurations of places and their relation to movement. Parkour re-shapes rigid concepts of places and their human encounter through movement. Through its encounter with obstacles Parkour activates the silent potential for movement located in the relation between bodies and thus reaches beyond material boundaries (e.g., a wall). As a deterritorializing practice, I will use Parkour to re-consider the relations between different bodies such as architectural configurations, subjects and their urban ecologies to develop a relational model for movement to shape our everyday encounters with matter.

**Keywords** Parkour · Embodiment · Place · Movement · Urban ecologies · Affect

## 1 Introduction

Parkour as urban practice recently received significant recognition throughout Western media cultures as a spectacular and highly marketable activity or sport in urban environments.<sup>1</sup> *Traceurs* are the practitioners of this urban activity. The central idea is to find new ways of movement in dialogue with urban configurations. Routes and “runs” constitute the preliminary extension and testing of a constructed ground. In other words, Parkour is a highly training-related physical practice based on a philosophy of “pure movement,” the endless oscillation between motion and rest. In that sense, as Spinoza points out, “bodies are distinguished from one another in respect of motion and rest, quickness and slowness” (1992). What appears to be an acrobatic sport with a high degree of precision, induced by a good deal of courage, presents itself as the art of moving in urban settings. Obstacles, built structures and often abandoned or useless architectural configurations become sites for movement to activate the endless potential of these places.

As pointed out in various publications on Parkour, the term itself derives from the military practice of an obstacle course, known as the *parcours du combattant* (Feireiss 2007). The first generation of articles focused on precise descriptions of Parkour and its history as well as potential reconsiderations about engagement with the city and

<sup>1</sup> For the community of practitioners, the differentiation between Parkour and *free running* seems to be of crucial importance. Whereas Parkour focuses on the most efficient way to move across different obstacles, *free running* includes acrobatics and moves beyond efficiency. *Free running* is usually associated with Sébastien Foucan, and Parkour is associated with David Belle. Both are the founding members of Parkour and its first group, Yamakasi, in the Parisian suburbs (Mister Parkour 2009).

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**Fig. 1** Parkour practice Montréal. *Image credits:* Julie Gauthier, Parkour practice, Montréal

architecture from different socio-political angles. The underlying approach here refers to these historic and descriptive foundations but essentially aims at a new concept of relational movement rather than another historical overview of the practice itself (Fig. 1).

Parkour has been only sparsely addressed as a research topic in academic discourses so far (besides a significant number of medical treatises on fractures caused through the practice of Parkour). Two exemplary publications deal with Parkour and the potential of fear as motor for a playful re-appropriation of how fear can enhance creativity (Saville 2008) and the rupture of organized corporate space through Parkour (Daskalaki et al. 2008). Both Saville and Daskalaki et al. treat Parkour as an embodied practice that provides alternate ways to deal with architecture, space and power. Deriving from their roots in the Parisian suburbs, Parkour practices are now present in most metropolitan areas worldwide.<sup>2</sup> In light of this global phenomenon, the emphasis on the novelty of Parkour as a strategy of resistance and empowerment for generally disempowered citizens seems inappropriate. To subordinate Parkour to a mere enunciation of resistance would certainly disregard late-capitalist modes of immediate inclusion and appropriation. In a distancing gesture from a simplifying subject–object divide, Parkour emphasizes the continuous relationship between bodies of same substances under differentiated states of motion and rest. Parkour as the art

<sup>2</sup> See Fuggle 2008; Baviton 2007; Feireiss 2007; Saville 2008 and Daskalaki et al. 2008. After the commercial success of a movie dedicated to Parkour by Luc Besson, David Belle left Yamakasi to continue with a group called “Les Traceurs” in the Parisian *banlieu* Lisses. Sébastien Foucan moved to England and founded a variation of Parkour known as *free running*. In many cases, large-scale media coverage hardly distinguishes the two practices. According to practitioners, *free running* is regarded as more commercial and less focused on efficiency (private conversation with Samir Mesbah 01/03/09). For further information, see also: <http://www.misterparkour.com/category/articles/>. Accessed 20 Feb 2008.

of moving and the art of movement itself—the potential for alternative movements and routes through a close dialogue with the architectural ground—enables a practice of becoming bodies that manifest in a flash as bodies of different registers of motion and rest.<sup>3</sup> Parkour is neither a novel practice of embodied encounter that “makes the world” in a phenomenological sense nor a mere game with obstacles or emotions. On the contrary, Parkour addresses what a body can do in its most extreme diversity as distributed across its urban ecology that offers (or withholds) itself for a potential dialogue (Fig. 2).

## 2 Parkour as conceptual springboard

Academic discourse gradually recognizes Parkour as interesting formation for an interdisciplinary field of research, interlacing theories of architecture, embodiment and power. Hence, current discourse is mainly descriptive, with little consideration of Parkour’s potential beyond the discursive formations of subversion and resistance. Apart from publications on the ludic elements of Parkour as altered form of engagement with the city and as a subversive practice (Fuggle 2008; Baviton 2007), I want to focus on two particular articles and their analysis of Parkour in relation to architecture (Saville 2008; Daskalaki et al. 2008). Both Saville and Daskalaki et al. address often-simplified references to subversion, leisure or embodiment in relation to Parkour. These examples will serve as a general overview of the slowly growing number of publications on Parkour and their generally discourse-related foundation.

Stephen John Saville conceptualizes Parkour as a way to imagine space differently from its intended function and playful encounter with built structures (2008). Even though his experiential and anthropological approach is generally open to different forms of becoming through relations between humans and non-humans, it also reinforces the subject–object divide that anthropomorphizes every further step of analysis. The legacy of interpretation and representation implies a certain openness for new movement to take place but also conceals the potential of a material ground to build relations with other bodies in motion. Material ground, in reference to Deleuze (1994) and Simondon (1980), is the potential of matter to function as actively shaping part for movement to happen. Their

<sup>3</sup> *Becoming* refers here to the Deleuzian conceptual nexus of a concretization of potentials into a meta-stable state of actualization. It is a process that, similar to Spinoza’s motion and rest of substances, opens up the possibility of a differentiation of the actual state by influxes of a becoming Other or becoming different (see Deleuze 1994, 1–27). See also his elaborations on Gilbert Simondon’s concept of individuation (Deleuze 2004a, 116–125 and 2004, 86–89).



**Fig. 2** Parkour practice, Montréal. *Image credits:* PK514, Parkour practice, Montréal and Toronto

conceptions of ground (in French, *fond*) transcend the understanding of matter as agent or *actant* (Latour 1987, 1993) and emphasize the ground's *potential* to shape experience. *Potential* in this context is defined as an open process for becoming through movement that offers a non-representational and non-imaginary model for movement to take place and things to take form as tangible. *Becoming*, in one definition used by Deleuze and Guattari, is a process of emergence, transition and change (Deleuze 1988). The particularity of *becoming* lies in its characteristic of being of the register of the interval or the in-between where things shift, move about and transduce. In other words, *becoming* is a concentration of different forces that push toward an event taking form and thus being graspable. This approach does not necessarily locate the becoming of an event in the cognitive capacity to *imagine* a difference (which nevertheless is an important compartment of the event) but rather focuses on the relations between different bodies and the experience of an event as the very relations that bring it forth. From such an angle, the relations are what constitute the experience of an event and not the experience that precedes the relations.<sup>4</sup> Parkour exposes the creation of new relations through movement. These relations are experienced, but they are always the result of relations between bodies (e.g., material ground and human body) and their liaisons through the Traceur's movements.

<sup>4</sup> For a very thorough concept of relations as the *milieu* (fr. for environment and middle) for an event to emerge, see Brian Massumi's elaborations on the "logic of the in-between" (Massumi 2002).

By foregrounding the material presence of bodies, the longing for meaning and the primary production of knowledge that emerges through the instrument of interpretation cease to be the dominant conceptual force. As Saville points out, a certain immanence of affect arises that "motivates and depends upon the mobility that reorganizes connections between elements of the world" (Saville 2008). Hence, the force of a reorganizing mobility or movement in Saville's analysis feeds back into a generally cognition-based processing that is generated only through the human encounter and the institution of the mind as interpreter. He states that Parkour is "essentially a practice intent upon re-imagining place" (2008). What if the becoming of an environment through movement as relational intensity reaches far beyond the imaginary in an interpretative manner and therefore becomes *affective*? The affective relational intensity here defines a *sentience* of affective qualities in the embodied practice of moving. *Affect*, or *affective*, describes a quality or forces that precede the effects of an event being experienced. *Affects* are always at the cusp of an event taking form and being perceived, they give *volume* to the experience (Deleuze 1988). Thus, it is not merely the perception and imaginary capacity of the human that enables different routes to be taken across built configurations in the case of Parkour, but the affective potential of the entire ecology (human-body-organism-environment) that creates intensities. Intensity is the "strength or duration ... of the [movement's] effects" (Massumi 2002). Intensity is the tangible compartment of affective force in the event—that which makes an event perceivable.

The imaginary for Saville seems to remain on a solely interpretative level that tries to inscribe an embodied practice of movement back into dominant models on thought, memory, the text and the discourse. If Parkour is the art of movement, one has to take embodiment seriously as another register of imagination beyond cognitive interpretation. On a physical level movement foregrounds what a body can do, what its desires for movement are, and how it shapes intensity.

Affects underline every potential movement. The Traceur creates a route through a continuous negotiation with the material ground that enables action to take form in movement. The Traceur employs a sensing-thinking-feeling nexus to activate the potential of a route to be taken. Saville definitively considers different registers of materialities that move with and beyond the event of a Traceur's action. He emphasizes that "Parkour always involves the mobility of other materialities, be they living, inanimate, or intangible ideas or knowledge of techniques" (Saville 2008). In this sense, for potential movement to take place, the ground itself feeds back into a complex relaying process between different states of motion and rest and their

oscillation between bodies. A Traceur does not plan a route or run across obstacles, but the action mobilizes bodies and their different registers of movement, enabling action to take form. This first step toward a different encounter with architectural configurations through movement also implies a different concept of what a body is and how it moves in relation to its environment (i.e., space and place).

Saville thoughtfully points out the potential of *place* as active and “evocative by virtue of its ability to stretch, jump and scratch temporal lineage” (2008). Crucial to such an open understanding of place’s potential is a rigorous conception of *space* and *place*. One of the most famous differentiations between space and place derives from Leibniz’s correspondence with Clarke. Leibniz regards every event in *spacetime* as the result of relations under dynamic principles, or the principles of force (Leibniz’s second paper, Alexander 1956). One can therefore experience space and place only in their relational state through *situations* that one experiences (Leibniz’s fifth paper, Alexander 1956). Place is that which is common to all the relations of bodies’ co-existence in their agreement of their relations. Space is the general potential for places to cluster relations that build experience through their co-existence and movement. Place then becomes a minute intensive coming-into-presence of forces. Place in this manner would enable us to regard architecture and the relations it might engender as intrinsically dependent on its relations, co-existents and movement.<sup>5</sup>

Architecture in light of urban practices such as Parkour collapses as a rigid concept and opens itself toward a rhythmical differentiation through movement. Capitalist implements of architectural planning, and the corporate money that widely enables architectural projects to take form, fall short in light of Parkour’s potential for different ways of encountering and moving with and through supposedly rigid structures. If one regards this potentiality set free through movement as endless forces toward different palpable configurations, the binary of empowered versus disempowered sets of individuals seems inappropriate. Here, the attempted dialogue with different discursive mechanics of power and control becomes a monologue in a self-reflective loop based on concepts of interpretation and the urge for meaning. Without rejecting the importance of the discursive itself, one can re-conceptualize the relations

between humans, the subject and their environment on an embodied yet material level.

If Parkour, as Daskalaki et al. claim, has the potential to “weave into architecture to become a living whole,” then architecture and its material ground weave themselves into the Traceurs and enable movement to happen (Daskalaki et al. 2008). Therefore, it is necessary to draw a precise line between human-centered approaches of embodiment and encounter and open-ended shifting configurations of places and their relations through movement. For Daskalaki et al., “Parkour and its philosophy offer a revealing medium for exploring the relationship between the environment and the human body in everyday situations, between architecture and movement, organizational structures and possibility, freedom and control” (2008). On the one hand, Daskalaki et al. yield a certain reformulation of existing terms and structures, but on the other, they reinforce these terms without considering the potential of relations as the medium from which new events might emerge. In other words, in contrast to de Certeau’s tactics of *everyday life* (de Certeau 1984) and the Situationist strategies of *derive* and *détournement*, the subject–object binary gives way to bodies that move and build relations through the sensing-thinking-feeling nexus that is not reducible to the human (body) but accounts for all bodies that are in movement. What is lacking from such ideas about everyday life is a thorough relational model between different bodies instead of a dyade of the human and its environment. In his praise for practices and interventions on an urban scale, de Certeau analyzes why practices such as Parkour play with the two meanings of power in the sphere of the city. In his Foucauldian reading of the city as place to produce totalizing powers and a sphere with the intrinsic potential to reach beyond the panoptic power, de Certeau annotates the two meanings of power in the Spinozist differentiation between *potestas* and *potentia*. *Potestas*, as the discursive power that orders, disciplines and punishes, plays the role of the corporation, the built structure to separate and defend, and the mechanisms of control through technologies of surveillance, tracing of bodies and expressions of identity through code as information (in this case, mostly binary code). *Potentia* addresses the potential of such practices to shape and shift these controlling mechanisms through alternative movements. Parkour emerges not necessarily as a direct response to the disempowering mechanisms of corporate forces of control (Daskalaki et al. 2008), but reaches a deeper level of activation of the forces at stake once movement has taken place. In other words, the relations of bodies and movement to architecture remain on a merely external level and are intrinsically conceptually curbed as long as we regard experience without the relations that enable such configurations to come into presence. In that sense, Parkour and its practice

<sup>5</sup> In his work “The Practice of Everyday Life,” Michael de Certeau provides a very thorough analysis of his interpretation of space and place (de Certeau 1984). His treatment is similar to Leibniz’s distinction. Hence, for de Certeau, “space is practiced place,” whereas for Leibniz’s, relational model space would be rather the overall configuration of different place configurations relating to each other in continuous movement (Leibniz’s fifth paper, Alexander 1956). Practice here would be the relation that always becomes something other than what it is and therefore space is less accessible for action than a mere potential for place and action.

of engaging with material formations to move differently through apparently rigid *spaces* (whether they be abandoned, corporate or public) foregrounds the potential for the continuous presencing of relations as “embodied” experiences. These relations usually pass unnoticed in the course of our experiences and come to the fore once boundaries are challenged and transgressed. Parkour certainly addresses and challenges the discursive formations at stake, but at the same time one has to go further to regard movement and its oscillation between motion and rest as potential for relations between all sorts of bodies.

Treatments of Parkour as an alternative practice to foreground the potential for new relations to emerge through the actively shaping parts of humans and non-humans often fall back into prescribed categories of resistance, embodiment and space. The detection of a potential embedded in Parkour as practice persists, but the employment of concepts referring to the “discursive” never really challenges overall assumptions about architecture, objects or space. Even though these approaches proclaim a certain critical momentum in Parkour, they mostly remain on the level of cultural signifiers and discursive formations. The general anti-hegemonic note such critiques emphasize barely considers the problematic reinforcement of the targeted apparatus through unchallenged conceptions of space, architecture and the body. If Parkour really introduces novelty in terms of urban practices of critique and provides new ways of thought, then one has to further develop the concepts of body, space, time, and movement. Without an alternative account of these concepts, one cannot discuss subversive strategies without remaining on the surface of signification and a play with ideas inside the hegemonic discourse.

### 3 Architectural body—the concept of landing sites

Through the practices of movement, Parkour yields an architecture that is “compositionally quite distinct from the ordered hierarchies of architecture-as-object, architecture-as-drawing, or architecture as idea... it is a rhythmical procedure, continually repeated yet forever new” (Borden 2001).

Architecture as an exercised mode of production continuously deals with the question of how to build and make new forms and structures to achieve particular responses within the environment of which this structure is a part. In most architectural discourses the question of how to build dominates the question of how it moves, which rhythms it has and what are its polyrhythmic structures in relation to other bodies. As a practice that builds, architecture continuously deals with boundaries and structures that in some way relate to other structures. Hence, movement in

architecture is often regarded as an exteriority (except statics and other mathematically imbued techniques to keep structures in *form*). Bodies move along, through and across built structures, but they do not move *with* them. In the case of Parkour, one could argue that the Traceur moves across built configurations in ways that have not been primarily anticipated by their initial idea and that even transgress their function. This would reduce the practice of Parkour to a subversive practice that regards architecture as given structures to move across it in a way that might be challenging to the defined enforcements of boundaries and control through these structures and their conception.

One of the major fascinations about Parkour lies in its use of movement to get from one place to another in the most *efficient* way. This practice surfaces as the spectacular jumps from rooftops in London (refer to BBC 4 advertisement with David Belle) to extensive writings on proper training and use of movement on numerous websites dedicated to the practice of Parkour. The “means of correct training” that resonate with endless blog entries on Parkour web forums about *efficiency* and training play an important role in the institutionalizing tendencies of a practice that received massive media attention and therefore became part of the dominant discourse. Apart from Parkour’s problematic and discursive analysis, the relations between different bodies are an integral part of its self-definition and practices. In its practices but also in its writing, Parkour develops a particular poetics of movement beyond the signifier and directly plugs into a continuous flow of relations between bodies: “This world we live in consists of resources that ease the pain of minor inconveniences. Impatience yields rush, rush yields shortcuts and shortcuts yield intricate movement.... Never will the body stop moving.”<sup>6</sup>

In their seminal work “Architectural Body,” architects and artists Madeline Gins and Arakawa propose an architecture that “ought to be designed for actions it invites” (2002). Their architecture aims at a relational concept of bodies, an architectural body—a body as an “organism-person-environment” (2002). In their reasoning, they posit a rather human-centered conception of encounter with architecture. Nonetheless, Gins and Arakawa remain productively ambiguous in their concepts and allow a playful openness to work with their ideas creatively. What they regard as an organism is a biomass that enables a process “to person” (ibid.). *Personing* is the forming of a compact, subjective “nexus” out of actions relative to the built environment in which they take place. Gins and Arakawa therefore understand a person as always being an organism, as a set of conditions born out of action. The organism that

<sup>6</sup> VA-Parkour Timeless. <http://ca.youtube.com/watch?v=XWWb4vQH4KU> (accessed 20/02/09).

persons always coincides with its environment: it becomes a nexus, an organism-person-environment. The potential of a personing organism depends on how it positions its body (ibid.). Without being specific, Gins and Arakawa leave the potential for body positionings open for any kind of body that positions and influences other positionings in relation to it: “Surroundings invite, provoke, and entice persons to perform actions, and the enacting motions of these actions not only serve upon alternate vantage points but also inevitably shift sense organs about” (ibid.). While remaining in the reference frame of the human body and its perceptual cues, they shift from a psychological model toward the movement that happens between percepts and affects in their relaying through relations, or what they call “the air passage through which the body draws in atmospheric wherewithal” (2002).

The close relation between movement, the body and the environment foreground what Parkour develops through its engagement with obstacles and presumably fixed structures. Both Parkour and Gins and Arakawa emphasize the flows (the air passage) between organism-body-environment to propose an alternative technique to understand relations between different bodies. As Gins and Arakawa point out, “a taking shape of surrounds and bodies and organisms and persons occurs intermixedly. Logic would want to get in there with a knife and cut them apart” (2002). What Parkour does then is emphasize the intermixed character of its practices that interweaves in its action different bodies (surroundings, organisms, persons) and therefore deterritorializes the former “territorialized” complex of built structure and discursive formations. The concepts of territorialization and deterritorialization derive from Deleuze and Guattari’s concepts about the relations between actual composites and their virtual potential (Deleuze and Guattari 2004). To summarize their argument, territorializing forces anchor percepts and affects in an actual experience that becomes palpable. Deterritorializations are the forces that yield beyond the territory, and in their very yielding provide the potential for re-territorialization (2004). One could regard the practice of Parkour as a foregrounding of the deterritorializing potential through its different modes of moving across territories (territories in Deleuze and Guattari are never only physical entities but can also be territories of thought). Thus, Parkour enables a deterritorialization and re-territorialization consisting of difference through movement. If we regard these continuous shifting relations between territories as processes of deterritorialization and re-territorialization, we can further develop concepts that highlight the relations between different territorial parts and their assemblages through the movement-experience-nexus. Parkour’s encounter with obstacles has a very different quality for the Traceur than for the normal pedestrian. Traceurs do not regard obstacles

as something merely to surpass but seek the obstacles’ potential for different movements to take place. An obstacle in its material presence inhabits a double position; on the one hand, it is something to be surpassed, and on the other hand, it is something that unfolds the potential of a different movement to take place.<sup>7</sup> The obstacle functions as a fragile “landing site,” which relates to other bodies in various ways to enable movement to occur and to deterritorialize territories (Fig. 3).

Gins and Arakawa use their concept of landing site to address the interaction between processes of perception and imagination as part of the body and their relations to the organism-person-environment (2002). They commence with the notion of something “being apportioned out” to enable a world to be formed (2002). The concept of landing sites enhances a further understanding of how bodies relate to each other and what a body can do. The real strength of their concepts reveals itself in the notion of *site* and the process of being sited. “Organism-person-environment consists of sites and would-be sites. An organism-person, a sited body, lives as one site that is composed of many sites” (ibid.). Gins and Arakawa delve into the emergence of a “person architectonics” through the shifting processes of landing of sites. The body is always in a certain way territorial, as it keeps a certain form, but at the same time it is the product of continuously intersecting and dissolving landing sites. A landing site is part and parcel of an actual percept in relation to its environment and at the same time the force of deterritorialization, which opens toward affects and their virtual potential. In other words, if one defines Parkour as a process of landing of different sites to compose larger sites, such as the body, one has to regard the affective force that hides in the material ground (i.e., an obstacle) out of which Parkour develops movement. Movement is not so much a choreographic result of conscious decisions but rather a plugging into different rhythmicities and the production of new rhythms in relation with the built environment.

For Gins and Arakawa, an organism-person-environment “fields” its surroundings as a sequence of sitings (2002). The relational bonds between different landing sites give birth to the fielding process and allow it to take place. They base their theory on three categories of landing sites: perceptual landing sites, imaging landing sites and dimensionalizing landing sites: “Through landing-site configurations, organism-person-environment takes hold and holds forth” (2002). In the eyes of Gins and Arakawa, landing sites, their fielding and their singling-out “bring the

<sup>7</sup> As Samir Mesbah, a Montréal-based Traceur, points out, on the one hand you try to “beat the obstacle” and on the other hand, it is the obstacle that catches your attention and shifts your perception of architecture and urban fabric entirely (private conversation 01/03/2009).



**Fig. 3** Parkour practice Montréal. *Image credits:* Julie Gauthier, Parkour practice, Montréal

world into existence in all its features” (2002). The organism-body-environment takes *notice* of landing sites in a perceptual and imaging manner. In other words, Gins and Arakawa do not describe perception as mere bodily practice but acknowledge the circumstance of something being noticed: “All points or areas of focus, that is, all designated areas of specified activity, count as perceptual landing sites (visual, aural, tactile, olfactory, proprioceptively, kinaesthetic somaesthetic [pain])” (2002). These perceptual landing sites are never entirely reducible to a particular shape; instead, different perceptual landing sites overlap and transform into each other. A smaller perceptual landing site, such as the armrest of my chair, defines a perceptual landing site on its own but is at the same time part of the larger landing site, the chair. For Gins and Arakawa, the existence of perceptual landing sites suffices as a first hold on things in the environment; they enable a “fielding” but are not entirely fixed. Fielding is the process of a set of relations from the organism-person-environment to come into being. Imaging landing sites can be described as the amorphous compartment of noticing, a fielding that always depends on perceptual and imaging landing sites. They are “amorphous accordings of more information than is directly supplied” (2002). While locating the imaging landing site in their concept of a person that underlies cognitive processing, including memory and recognition, imaging landing sites do not serve exclusively as a representation of actual perceptual landing sites. Rather, they

transgress the general state of registration of the fielding of a perceptual landing site and enable processes of imaging that reach beyond perception. Fielding becomes possible through the relations and interaction between perceptual and imaging landing sites.

In their relational interchanges, perceptual and imaging landing sites bring forth dimensionalizing landing sites: “A dimensionalizing landing site registers location and position relative to the body” (2002). With their theory, Gins and Arakawa establish an “on-the-spot data management system” that provides through landing sites “a neutral zone of emphasis ... [which] simply bypasses subject-object distinctions” (2002). In an attempt to consider Parkour as a practice of different movements between bodies, Gins and Arakawa’s approach might appear deeply human centered. Hence, their open concept of landing sites regards the body as a potential person but includes the varying forces that move with that body becoming a person (i.e., the movement of other bodies). The body itself defines the platform for different forces to intersect and bring the organism-person-environment to the fore. One arrives at a concept of the body that notices and moves, but always in relation to other bodies and their movement. Awareness of landing sites is not just a matter of human sense perception but a relaying process between different landing sites and their configurations intersecting in a tangible percept. Imaging landing sites add the affective force that always reaches beyond the perceptual and injects forces of movement that seek deterritorialization where territories have been formed before (Fig. 4).

Parkour works on the level of an embodied encounter as a person with obstacles, but at the same time its practice would not introduce novelty without its deterritorializing concepts of the obstacle. The architectural configuration as obstacle embodies the transformative potential of deterritorialization through movement. The body is not a human-centered concept but matter that moves between motion and rest, always in relation and always changing its assemblages. These are assemblages of different landing sites, of different forces that produce territorializations (percepts) and deterritorializations (affects). Thus it is understandable that Deleuze and Guattari ask, “How Do You Make Yourself a Body Without Organs?” because the body already reaches beyond what a body is defined as and moves toward what a body can do (2004). In Parkour, training (the other 90% of the activity, which is not available on YouTube) deals with the potential of the body and what it can do. Extending the body beyond its capacity is one of the major goals and attractions of Parkour. Under the longing for pure extension, landing sites open up and need to be continuously addressed through the movements from one obstacle to another. The body in Parkour never exists apart from its fielding and the landing sites, which



**Fig. 4** Parkour practice, Toronto. *Image credits:* PK514, Parkour practice, Montréal and Toronto

make movement possible. The obstacle becomes the bearer of the potential movement-nexus between bodies and their relations. According to Bergson, the relations between movement and space are inextricably tied into his concept of duration as the major difference between entities or, in his words, composites (Bergson 1910). Duration in relation to the shifting formations of space and place becomes the necessary compartment that moves with the re-territorializing forces of a body's action. For Bergson, differences in kind (as the only proper form of difference) are based on duration and not on degree. If we define the differences in kind between bodies according to their duration instead of their degrees, the passing of movement becomes the force to shift these durations and therefore to introduce difference and novelty (Deleuze 1988). Parkour as pure movement becomes a rhythmical force of deterritorialization that creates relations to form bodies and sites along their durations. The concept of duration and bodies that are always in excess of themselves radically transgresses fixed conceptions of space and matter as inert and passive. Processes of siting, fielding and landing could not happen without a collective becoming between different bodies, their substances and their durations.

#### 4 Movement, materiality and architecture

Zoe Laughlin addresses Parkour practices from a material point of view (Laughlin 2008). She states, "Parkour's process of actualization emerges according to the dialectic

between the material nature of the urban environment on the one hand, and on the other hand through the Traceur's materiality and the materials he uses" (Laughlin 2008).<sup>8</sup> She further underlines the traces such a material encounter leaves on the body, such as callosity on the hands (ibid.). In reference to Bergson, Brian Massumi points out that we "can only make use of something because it has *already* been in contact with our action" (Massumi 2001). In both cases, the perception of something as an exteriority to a body as a person refers to the material ground and its tactile and physical encounter with it. The body's relation to the material ground built into perception as "pre-continuation of itself" evokes an "action of things on us, as of our bodies on things" (2001). For Massumi, perception is a synaesthetic process whose completion is "amodal" because "it happens between the sense modes, in their relating (through movement)" (2001). From a durational approach, an amodal completion of perception through the relating of sense modes defines the correlation between perceptual and imagining landing site, the emergence of composites. The Traceur's fielding connects the ongoing actual and virtual action of material bodies on us (person) and, at the same time, our action on material bodies. Hence, the fielding is not an interior process revealed as a black box but is itself involved in a constant movement between sense modes and their relations to other bodies and *textures*. Encounters with obstacles in Parkour as encounters with different textures, their marking qualities as landing sites and the relational forces of deterritorialization build a complex relational model that rests between states and therefore does not apply to a clearly definable mechanism. As Massumi emphasizes in his account of architecture's content as movement, one has to address "bodies at the level of their potential movement, that is, below the level of object recognition, familiar function and cultural decoding" (Massumi 2004). In other words, if we want to develop an architectural response to the findings of Parkour as practice of movement between bodies, one has to consider the body's potential for movement at the level of *force*: "The force would have to be at once deforming (able to separate bodies from the habitual form of their experience), transformative (converting actual movement into potential movement) and transitive (capable of being abstracted into the architecture). In a word (Simondon's), the force would have to be transductive" (2004).

Parkour, as a practice of movement that has transductive qualities, entails a durational model of movement and architecture. In a durational model, the transductive forces reveal their real potential for relations in the movement of bodies. Differences in duration foreground the assemblages between bodies and their potential to form larger landing

<sup>8</sup> Author's translation.



sites and carve out percepts from an affective and transductive force field (the *virtual* in Deleuze and Guattari). If the deterritorialization of Parkour practices gains its force from the potential of bodies to act upon a person and vice versa, boundaries between subject and object dissolve. In a prolongation of this line of thought it is necessary to reconsider objects and things, i.e., their material ground, in different ways. Simondon describes the relation between transductive forces of objects and their relation to their exterior as their *associated milieu* (Simondon 1980). It is the associated milieu of (technical) objects that conditions and at the same time is conditioned by the object itself. The practice of Parkour constantly moves and shapes the associated milieu of the technical object that can be regarded as architecture on a large scale. Architecture shapes as much as it is shaped. The material ground, the objects and their durational aspects re-territorialize the milieu, introduce new landing sites and discharge others. These processes are the relational movements of bodies in motion and rest. An organism-person-environment plugs into the processes underway through movement and therefore creates the necessary links for percepts to surface and for affects to unleash their force.

Such a relational approach requires another concept of the object and materiality beyond the mere human force of organization. If we regard the relational and shaping potential of material forces on the process of movement, we realize the object becomes something different from a plain thing to be present at hand for encounter. The object is rather an actively shaping part of any movement process taking place. Without the relational bonds between different bodies, one could not reach a sufficient state for presence and thus for perception and encounter. Parkour develops techniques to move differently with the obstacle's (object's) potential to be sited and therefore to acknowledge its own duration and difference in kind. The potential embedded in the object yields the virtual potential for objects' actions on perceiving bodies and the associated milieu. Architectural configurations not only offer potential for different movements but generally refer to bodies and their movements. Parkour unleashes transductive forces through movement on manifold levels. Through training, it unrolls the potential of what a body can do. Through movement it builds a perception-movement-environment nexus that works on a rhythmical basis between different durations. On a material level, it creates relations between different bodies and their associated milieu to allow a grasping of potential through perception. On an embodied level, it abandons the boundary between inside and outside, the body and architecture, to give birth to an *architectural body* that always moves on the level of relation between bodies, not in their separated states.

## 5 Conclusion

Parkour provides the potential for a reconsideration of the transductive forces embedded in the movement between bodies to create possible configurations and develop ever-changing landing sites. The relations between different durations and their movement define architecture as intrinsically fluid and malleable. It is therefore crucial to address the forces of transduction that foreground architecture's potential to move with other bodies and to create different rhythms rather than to enable or restrict the movement of other bodies as exterior to it. These insights might activate larger shifts away from dominant discourses and find resonance through new modes of building and therefore move with places and their potential. Similar to Gins and Arakawa's claim to build in a way that one might surpass the human determination of death, Massumi demands "work with *emergence*" (Gins and Arakawa 1997; Massumi 2001). Deterritorialization as an inclusive part of Parkour becomes the necessary point of departure for a theory and architecture that builds on relations and dwells on emergence rather than the acceptance of pre-defined terms, categories and structures. Architecture in its role of construction as "spacing of embodied movement" has to incorporate the relational bonds between bodies to achieve a plane of emergence for potentialities to become palpable (Massumi 2004).

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