

The 'Parkour Organisation': Inhabitation of Corporate Spaces

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Abstract

This paper discusses the corporate city and the way it structures the experience of its inhabitants. The corporate city is seen here as the embodiment of power relationships of a distinctly postmodern nature, a means to preserve and promote hegemonic and homogenising discourses like globalisation and consumerism. Corporate design and architecture embody specific kinds of relationships, experiences and perceptions of space and place. We will suggest that the corporate city is homogenised, lacking richness of civic space, not just in terms of form but in terms of structures (both, spatial structures and the kind of social structures/interactions they invite). The activities of a group of *traceurs* practicing *parkour* are described and their philosophy is explained as a metaphor for active participation and dialectic relationship between the actual and the possible structures of the world. Richness of experience, strengthening of community, variety of activity, openness and possibility are irrelevant (actually, inimical) to the corporate forces that shape our cities today. However, as the experience of *parkour* demonstrates, extreme artforms of 'urban activism' but also, more importantly, human agency and the performativity of the everyday, are capable of transforming the otherwise alienating non-places, to grounds of possibility, creativity and civic identity.

Key Words: architecture, corporatism, city, consumption, organisational space, parkour

Introduction

The concepts of 'place' and 'space' have recently become, apart from themes of architectural theory, urban sociology and philosophy, topics of investigation for organisational theory (Hatch, 1997; Guillen, 1997; Burrell and Dale, 2002; Dale and Burrell, 2003; Kornberger and Clegg, 2004). The latter has used 'architecture' and the 'built environment' as metaphors to explain and understand organizations and organisational behaviour. Yet, we would argue that architecture as a theory but also as a practice could be employed more extensively within the field of organisational theory in order to enhance our understanding of organisations and contribute to the analysis of organisational behaviour.

As early as the late 1920s, Elton Mayo (1933) was researching how worker productivity could be affected by the physical environment, namely illumination levels within a factory environment. Later on, Homans (1950) linked the 'physical' with the 'social' explaining that the social effects found by Mayo in the Hawthorne experiment were in fact the result of change in the physical environment. With the Civil Rights Movement and the birth of social design in the 1960s, sociologists in collaboration with designers and architects attempted to understand the relationship between people and their environment concluding that physical space and the objects that constitute it have symbolic significance (Sommer, 1983).

Nevertheless, the study of space and organisations appears to be rather fragmented and underdeveloped and therefore prior studies' heuristic value and theoretical contribution to organisational studies remains rather limited. Although in the field of

architecture, this is a well documented outcome (architect-user relationship), in the area of organizational theory, the diverse use of organizational space and the effects that this may have on the experience of organizations is not very well researched. Previous studies predominantly informed by functionalist approaches, have investigated the variations of organisational design and development through improvement of the built environment (Becker, 1981; Pfeffer, 1982; Baldry, 1999). However, assumptions, hierarchies and structures can be embedded in the organisation of space and thus, the study of space as a 'locale' (Giddens, 1979) can provide means for revealing and exploring contested terrains in the field of organisational behaviour and analysis (Henley, 1977; Hatch, 1990; Baldry, 1999).

Early research on space and organizations (Manning, 1965; Palm, 1977; Henley, 1997; Nichols and Beynon, 1977; Pollert, 1981) studied the ordering of space and how through the study of spatial arrangements and physical structures one can reveal assumptions about status, behaviours, values and power relations within organizations. These assumptions or imposed order is often challenged by the users of space (Baldry, 1999) yet deterministic descriptions of spatial ordering come to defend the hegemony of capitalist prescriptions of organizing and reaffirm managerial control over the labour process.

Thus, in the field of organisation studies, when space has been used in order to describe and investigate the employment relationship, it has been conceptualised 'too rigidly as either a functional location for organization, or a symbolic one for the control/resistance dialectic to take place' (Down and Taylor, 2001: 9). For example, from the field of services marketing, Bitner (1992) suggested that through creative

management of the 'servicescape', organisations could contribute to the attainment of both internal (organisational) and external (marketing) goals.

These behavioural or functionalist approaches have been challenged by more constructivist views that utilise the notion of 'appropriation' to demonstrate how users of space participate in giving meaning to a space and as a result, how they divert managerial and organisational initiatives (Aubert-Gamet, 1997). That is, according to constructivist approaches, the individuals (customers) do not only use (or populate) space but also co-construct it and in effect have opportunities to subvert or divert it from its pre-conceived basis.

For example, Urry (1995) argued for the constitutive power of buildings (feelings and thought) and Gagliardi (1996) asserted that the material environment plays a role in the constitution of the self (Bugni and Smith, 2002). A year later, Guillen (1997), in a very influential paper, discussed scientific management and modernist architecture, reassessed the aesthetic context of organizational behaviour and suggested that scientific management's qualities and impact in contemporary society and industry need to be reconsidered. These studies invited more critical theorists to incorporate in their studies the relationship between the built environment and management power structures, consumption and domination (Burrell and Dale, 2003). For example, Dale and Burrell (2002), examined architecture as a 'cultural product' in an analysis of how architectural confinements have framed our understanding of space and place (Dale and Burrell, 2002).

In addition, Dale and Burrell (2002), discussing the aesthetic/anaesthetic dualism and body-in-space experience, suggested that architecture has played a very important role in the development of 20th century management practice and labour relations. Following this, organisational space can be used strategically to promote specific organisational/corporate culture and shape organisational behaviour and identity. Criticizing Cartesian rationality, Kornberger and Clegg (2004) invited us to reflect upon the relationship between the power of spatial organizations and the implications for management and the process of organizing.

Hernes (2004), without providing an exhaustive account of a theory of space, attempted to replace the study of organisational context with the study of the 'evolving organisation' and 'boundaries' in an attempt to fit Lefebvre's (1991) spatial ontology to organisational studies. Yet, Toyoki (2004) suggested that despite the fact that Hernes (2004) recognises the significance of the 'socio-spatial' dialectic, he doesn't explicitly apply its principles in his theoretical framework hence his contribution is limited. For Toyoki (2004) a successful model of space-organisational analysis (through the lenses of a Lefebvrian reader) will demonstrate and explain spatial production and reproduction. Furthermore, this model ought to take into account the 'dialectic interplay...[of] "how space is" (ontology of space) [that] depends on its dialectic relation to "how space is known" and in turn, "how space is known" depends on the interplay between the subjectively experienced, epistemological modes of space' (Toyoki, 2004, p. 382). Watkins' (2005) discussion of Lefebvre's spatial triad in the context of organisational analysis provides a more promising account of organisational space taking into consideration the social, physical and mental aspects of space.

Yanow (1998) examined space as text and, by devising this analogy suggested that various audiences (readers) will perceive the built environment in unintended ways (see also Yanow, 1995). More recently, Clegg and Kornberger (2006) problematised the linear relation between organisation of space and social order and suggested a ‘labyrinthical architecture’ that may be more creatively productive than one-dimensional models. By employing Koolhaas’s (1995) architectural approach, they suggested a strategically ‘void’ building that would enhance flexibility, deny boundaries and release potential.

Building upon constructivist models and phenomenological approaches to space and bodies, we will utilise the concepts of engagement, reciprocity and inhabitation to describe the dialectic relationship between space, body and the built environment. In this paper, we do not see space as a separate element related to organisational practice but we try to reassert the ‘existential spatiality of life in a balance trialectic that ranges from ontology through to a consciousness and *praxis* that are also simultaneously and presuppositionally social, historical and *spatial*’ [emphasis in the original] (Soja, 1996: 73).

The first aim of this paper is to develop and expand prior attempts to bring space, the built environment and embodied experience in the centre of organisational analysis. We carry approaches similar to the aforementioned forward, focusing on how ‘corporatised’ non-places that characterise modern civic environments could transform into places of dialectic inhabitation and creativity. Through this, we incorporate the themes of space, architecture and ‘dialectic engagement’ (Merleau-

Ponty, 1962; Bauman, 2003) into our understanding of post-modern forms of alienation, embodiment and identity.

The second building block and contribution of the paper emanates from the work of Borden (2001) and Howell (2001) on urban activities namely, skateboarding and the ‘new public sphere’. Both refer to this urban, extreme and subversive engagement with the built environment that originated almost twenty years ago, in order to investigate processes of surveillance and domination characterising ‘global’, ‘corporatised’ ‘post-modern’ cities.

Insert Picture 1 about here

The vehicle of this paper’s challenge to corporate space is an activity known as *parkour* or ‘free running’ – a kind of acrobatic performance between extreme sport and artform. This is used here as a metaphor but also as an inspiration to discuss the need for spatial structures in the city and workplace – architectural as well as organisational – that are not regimented and limiting, but instead encourage chance, interaction, possibility, imagination, creativity and change. Free running makes use of the built environment in original and engaging ways that rely on a deeply reciprocal relationship with the urban landscape, offering an insight in the study of place, space and our experience of embodiment and presence within them.

We will argue that the example of *parkour* illustrates how ‘non-places’, as described by Augé (1995), are transformed into landscapes with a sense of purpose and aesthetic/experiential potential, through this radical inhabitation. Urban activities

redefine discourses of totalising architectural trends in post-modern cities, inviting us to recognise architecture for what it really is: a realm of possibility, interactivity, inhabitation and reciprocity. In this paper we are examining *parkour* as an inseparable from spatial-perceptual experience, a holistic perspective of body, self, space and built environment. Thus we view space in relation to inhabitation, and buildings in connection with the human experiences within/through them.

In the first part, the paper will discuss the corporatisation of the city primarily employing the concept of non-place (Auge, 1995) and Bauman's (2003) writings on globalisation. Then, exploring the origins of *parkour* and its philosophy in relation to post-modern alienating environments and totalising corporate cultures, we will suggest that the *parkour* philosophy presents a useful metaphor for re-conceptualising public (corporate) space. Finally, we write about architecture as spatial structuring that acknowledges our embodiment and how *parkour*, as an urban activity, transforms mono-dimensional corporate spaces to interactive and inhabited places.

Corporatism and the Experience of Space

The way we experience (organisational) space is the result of imposed structures and architectural designs that resemble managerial (space) control over our (working) lives. In the field, the mine, the factory or the office, the corporate tower and the whole business district, out of town 'park' or 'city', masses of workers are employed to work in highly prescriptive (albeit often covertly so) spatial structures, that exemplify restricting socio-political structures of homogenisation, control and domination.

Allegedly, flat, flexible, lean and post-fordist, post-modern organisational structures have taken the place of bureaucratic, centralised organisations. Control has become cultural (Burawoy, 1979) and ‘job for life’ has been exchanged for project based work, mobility and transient work relationships. The ‘flexible firm’ (Atkinson, 1984), though still a term in question (Legge, 2005), has signalled the arrival of part-time work, tele-working, task variability. Manufacturing is gradually moving (or already moved) to places like China, India, or Latin America and office work now (e.g. call centres) is next to follow the paths of globalisation.

The enterprise discourse during the Thatcher years has already given rise to organisational communities of individualism, customer-driven policies and ‘vision’ management. Organisational theory, especially its critical branch, has moved on reflecting or responding to the challenges and debates of a post-modern arena: Urban entrepreneurialism (Steyaert and Katz, 2004) is now a dominant discourse that is mobilised to promote or make cities ‘marketable’, turning gradually public places into zones of consumption.

In this paper, we challenge contemporary corporate space both in building and urban scale, as well as in organisational and management terms. However, what we will call ‘corporatism’, or corporate space and attitude, does not refer exclusively to structures relating to corporate business, but also to areas that used to define the notion of ‘public interest’ or ‘civic ethos’ – that is, the city itself.

Insert Picture 2 about here

The forces of capitalism have converted places that could encourage difference and interaction to 'non-places' of homogenisation and indifference. Diversity, encounter and change, qualities that urban environments seek to encourage (Sennett, 1970; 1976) are substituted by alienation and passive consumption. Commodification within capitalist cultural contexts has reinforced separation, fragmentation and atomisation. Open spaces promote corporate images that reduce the public to mere consumers. Corporate plazas, shopping malls and commercialised skywalks are all evidence of the privatisation of what once was perceived as public space. Crucially, the ideology of corporations has infected public bodies, becoming the model for the redevelopment and expansion of the urban realm as a whole (Sennett, 2006). Convergence paradigms seem to embrace globalisation, the force that would break down all national barriers, leaving behind a happy, prosperous and multicultural world.

Living and working in any city globally, individuals are faced with certain prescriptions of space and converging urban architectural constructions. It is not only that our cultures of consumption have come to define our social interactions and meanings, it is also that our notions of space and the way we occupy it and move into it, co-construct our cultures, determine our relationship with work, colleagues, family, friends and nature. The corporation, after pressure from lobbies and due to economic globalisation and deregulation, has become since the end of the last century the dominant institution.

The post-modern, international corporation is a mono-dimensional structure, focusing on profit and productivity, corporate culture and identity, while it ignores the necessary complexity of social relations and ambiguity of human experience – a balance between openness and order/intelligibility – that inhabits successful public/working space. For

example, Disney and McDonald's are two companies that have offered cases for discussion for many business schools and business students but also for management academics (vanMaanen, 1992; Ritzer, 1993) and academic activists (Boje, 1995). The spectacle they provide but also their focus on consumption both fit with the 'post-modern' [see Legge's (2005) definition] times of hyper-reality and spectacle (Baudrillard, 1994), surveillance and seduction.

According to Soja (2000), all forms of social relations emerge, develop and change in the socially and culturally created context of the city (Lefebvre, 1991). This is possible via 'the social production of urban space' a process that encompasses social struggles and politics and knowledge and creativity. For Bauman (2003:7), 'it is precisely the profusion of strangers, permanent strangers, "forever strangers", that makes of the city a greenhouse of invention and innovation, or reflexivity and self-criticism, of disaffection, dissent and the urge of improvement'.

A fundamental condition for the above is the common ground between 'resident' and 'stranger', between identity and difference, which is both secure and open enough to allow for fruitful interaction between the two. In the highly anxious, global modern city, however, the dialogue between security and freedom becomes a hostile opposition. In the 'chains of mini-utopias' of corporate consumption, which are rapidly substituting public space in the city, freedom is equated with consumer choice and security with predictability.

At the same time, the realm in-between commercially appropriated spaces and their numbing familiarity has become awkward and 'desert-like' (Bauman, 2003: 25-26). It

is not just that users feel increasingly uncomfortable, somewhat lost and even threatened in the midst of a non-prescribed situation, it is also that the city and its authorities appear incapable, or unwilling, to negotiate openness with order, and communicate civic character and a sense of public *place*.

According to Augé (1995) the ‘non-places’ characteristic of late modernity are spaces of transience and alienation, lacking the situated, inherent structure of identity. The mode of the individual’s engagement with non-places is one of ‘solitary contractuality’, not a dialectic social relationship, while this ‘contract’ is often established through the mediation of words or text (Augé, 1995: 94; 96).

We would argue that a very similar operation to that performed by text in the characterisation of non-places, as proposed by Augé, is at play in the corporatised spaces we are critiquing even when text is actually absent. The prescriptive one-dimensionality of such spaces frequently relies on visual or narrative ‘catch-phrases’ for a basic establishment of boundaries and definition of location. Signs – whether texts, architectural gestures, corporate mottos or tag-lines disseminated through the media – establish the intended nature of many public spaces prescriptively, a priori and from a distance, like advertising, substituting its genuine revelation through dialectic engagement and participation.

The prescriptive monologue of non-places denies engagement and exploration and mutes the inexhaustible possibilities of genuine (public) place. We critique this attitude towards the understanding and construction of space, which stems from the corporate/consumerist framework and is responsible for anything from office

buildings (e.g. ‘Gherkin’) to public urban districts (e.g. Potsdamer Platz). The defining characteristic of this attitude is the total disregard of what constitutes successful space for interaction, creativity and ultimately life, in favour of a superficial formalism that communicates the corporate totalising hegemonies.

It is in this context that we introduced the philosophy of *parkour* or free running. Free runners, pushing the limits of engagement with urban landscapes, establish a relationship with space that can be seen as transformative, re-configuring the urban experience. We are not claiming the success of *parkour* as a movement; this is not the quest of this paper. Instead, we focus on the original and effective use of the most unpromising of space as experienced within corporatised Cities. Not surprisingly, big corporations have succeeded in manipulating and commercializing *parkour* by incorporating it into advertising campaigns and other media products (music videos and films) and thus converting it into a spectacle. This has led to the fragmentation of the movement and the emergence of the ‘traditionalist’ groups of traceurs who remain faithful to the philosophy of the activity and resist any threat of appropriation and control posed either by forces of corporatisation or by city bureaucracies¹ (for example, the Polish group of traceurs namely, X). Despite, appropriation attempts however and fragmentation of the movement, *parkour* as an activity, remains a very good illustration of engagement and dialectic as well as an expression of diversion and genuine inhabitation of cityscapes.

Le Parkour: Re-configuring the urban experience

¹ Discussions with members of the X movement of traceurs in Krakow, Poland during their participation in the 3rd Art of Management Conference, September 2006, Krakow, Poland.

Free running began in Lisses in the outskirts of Paris in 1988 and its philosophy was coined by Sebastian Foucan. Free running is about people using buildings to move within exceptionally uninviting urban spaces. They climb on the roofs and jump from building to building. They use no equipment, just their bodies and building structures (such as rails, rooftops, balconies). They do that as a hobby, as a sport and for some of them is a way of life, or a form of art.

Insert Picture 3 about here

The *traceurs* are breaking the lines of the city; the skyline is usually an inaccessible horizon that they seek to reclaim by inserting the body.

‘This art [*parkour*] is a way of apprehending the environment that surrounds us with, for only things, the human body. To be able to face all the obstacles, which are presented, whether they are in natural environment, or on various structures, all the things, in the research for a movement combining aesthetic and control. It’s in an other hand (sic), the self knowledge, the challenge against your own fears, because the obstacles are not all the times the things we imagine...’ (<http://perso.wanadoo.fr/parkour/parkourenglish/>)

The infamous Parisian suburbs, where *parkour* was invented, are among the most alienating and dehumanising urban clusters in the world. The model is a ruthless simplification of the Corbusian *Ville Contemporaine*, with a grid of identical high-rises towering over sprawls of land in between; spaces with token gestures of landscaping (playgrounds, greenery, etc), which cannot mitigate the greater socio-political, as well as architectural, failure of the development to create any sense of public life.

Portrayed remarkably in Mathieu Kassovitz film *La Haine* (1995) – about a ‘lost generation’ of teenage hooligans – the *banlieu* appears as a context that breeds fear, defensiveness and a sense of acute claustrophobia, despite the vastness of spaces.

Insert Picture 4 about here

It is easy to see *parkour* as a direct response to these spaces, an attempt to ‘trick’ them, through unconventional use, into yielding creative possibilities and a sense of one’s own body and humanity. Although the actual performance of free-running is highly demanding and exclusive, *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, organisational structures and possibility, freedom and control.

Through *parkour*, the given structure of space is challenged and redefined in reciprocity with the body:

‘My mobile body makes a difference in the visible world, being part of it; that is why I can steer it through the visible. [---] In principle all my changes of place figure in a corner of my landscape; they are recorded on the map of the visible. [---] The visible world and the world of my motor projects are each total parts of the same Being. This extraordinary overlapping, which we never think about sufficiently, forbids us to conceive of vision as an operation of thought that would set up before the mind a picture or a representation of the world, a world of immanence and of ideality. Immersed in the visible by his body, itself visible, the seer does not appropriate what he sees; he merely approaches it by looking, he opens himself to the world’ (Merleau-Ponty, 1964: 162).

Free running is an urban phenomenon and the cityscape is an integral part of it. Jumping offers free runners a sense of freedom from pre-defined perceptual routes and regimented experiences. Buildings become nodes of creativity towards an ever-changing range of routes and possibilities. During *parkour* activities, spaces acquire new use, becoming a liberating rather than restricting element in human experience.

“Society looks upon what we do as a bad thing, but they built up this concrete jungle around us. Concrete, roofs, whatever. And we’re told we can only walk in a certain way, we can only move in a certain way. Mankind has struggled for centuries to be free. The pursuit of *parkour* for us is a pursuit of freedom. The first big high I got from *parkour* was when I was sitting on a rooftop in central London. A pigeon sat with us. We were where the birds were and I suddenly felt free”.

Insert Picture 5 about here

Ian Borden (2001) in *Skateboarding, Space and the City*, refers to the ways in which skateboarders relate and redefine space as ‘found’, ‘constructed’ and ‘body-space’ relationship. He writes: ‘In terms of skateboarding’s relation to architecture, its production of space is not purely bodily or sensorial; instead, the skater’s body produces its space dialectically with the production of architectural space’ (p.101).

Insert Picture 6 about here

Merleau-Ponty (1962) suggested that it is through our lived body that we engage with our world:

‘...it is through the body that we have a world at all. In providing connection with, and access to, the world, the lived body integrates the individual with the social and material, including in specific enactments of practice or in particular organisations’ (Bengtsson et al. 2006).

This ‘free flowing’ activity is a socially symbolic act, a form of resistance to cityscapes that alienate, restrict and subjugate. In contrast to Borden’s (2001) skateboarders, however, free runners do not need skate-parks, do not prefer ‘squares, streets, campuses and semi-public buildings’ (p.194) that appropriate their experience (or have to be appropriated to become ‘skating’ venues):

‘...to *parkour*, it’s also to know how to deny evidences, to keep a critical acumen.[For] example, the streets, a marked out route, where we no longer need to wonder if we must take it or not. it’s here, we take it, that’s all. no thought needs to go into it at all. Whereas the *parkour*’s attitude is to wonder; "perhaps there is another way to move forward, a way which hasn't been explored yet?" the *parkour* is the adventurous spirit dared in conquered fields and which is applied at both literal and figurative senses (<http://www.urbanfreeflow.com/UrbanFreeFlow/artinmotion.htm>)

The city landscape for the free runners is in a process of continuous transformation.

Free running suggests the experiential interactivity between spatial structure and human body, establishing a dialectic relationship with even the most mono-dimensional, alienating environments. Buildings, in this context, present opportunity and challenge towards a creative inhabitation that empowers and liberates.

Traceurs ‘run through’ buildings, drawing a physical trajectory with their bodies:

“draw a straight line on a map of your home town. Start from point a, and go to the point b. don’t consider the elements which are in your way (barriers, walls, wire fences, trees, houses, buildings) as obstacles; hug them: climb, get over, jump: let your imagination flow: you’re now doing *parkour*...” (<http://www.urbanfreeflow.com/UrbanFreeFlow/artinmotion.htm>)

Insert Picture 7 about here

Following Certeau’s (1974) writings, *parkour* is a tactic that the disempowered employ in order to misappropriate and corrupt these consumerist and dehumanizing spaces. This is similar to the Situationists’ ‘*détournement*’, as Lefebvre (1974) explains:

‘An existing space may outlive its original purpose and the *raison d’être* which determines its forms, functions, and structures; it may thus in a sense become vacant, and susceptible of being diverted, re-appropriated and put to a use quite different from its initial one.[...] For a brief period, the urban centre, designed to facilitate the distribution of food, was transformed into a gathering place and a scene of permanent festival – in short, into a centre of play rather than of work – for the youth of Paris’.

The following section explores further the *parkour* metaphor by discussing the issue of passive spectatorship and active participation as experienced within contemporary city spaces.

Architecture and Embodiment: From Corporate to Corporeal

The corporatisation of the postmodern city, its culture and politics, has resulted in a marked impoverishment of public architecture. Buildings are reduced to objects and spaces to mere gestures, offering extremely limiting conditions for engagement with the public. Such architecture as consumer product is highly formalist, investing on visual sensationalism – buildings at their best from a distance or in a photograph – rather than carefully scaled spaces that invite repeated experiencing, through inhabitation and movement.

Projects like the GLA building and the Swiss Re tower (the ‘Gherkin’), both in London, share this attitude, despite having ‘opposite’ functions: the first being the city’s town hall and the second corporate headquarters. The objectified buildings are designed for maximum visual impact, standing out in defiance of their surrounding space rather than in any kind of relationship, while they invest in conceptual one-liners to make themselves ‘meaningful’ – one of the most remarkable being the GLA’s ‘glass equals transparency equals democracy’, also, incidentally, the key one-liner of the same architect’s Reichstag extension in Berlin (Böhm, 2005).

Such catchy yet misguided, and even dubious, gestures perform the same role as commercial advertising, where consumers are manipulated into a conviction that they will be affected in a certain way by the product, before they have had any experience of it. As a result, it becomes impossible for these spaces to contribute to the

composition and communication of a genuine, dialectic sense of place and identity – being, at best, autonomous abstractions and, at worst, manipulative advertisements. As we suggested earlier in the paper, this attempted designation of ‘place’ through simplistic signification (textual or otherwise) is actually characteristic of ‘non-place’ (Augé, 1995).

Beyond the potentially problematic ‘message’, the impoverishment of corporatised architecture results from the dramatic disembodiment which accompanies the intense investment on the visual. This is felt most powerfully on the urban scale, where the objectification of buildings leaves public space to emerge as a crude afterthought, an alienating non-place, rather than the living fabric of the city. The new Potsdamer Platz in Berlin is a telling such example. This highly significant, historic civic space is now ringed by corporate towers competing with each other over size and shape.

Insert Picture 8 about here

The space in between is reduced to precisely that: a leftover that issues no invitations for engagement, other than gazing up at the towers. There is, here, a fundamental discrepancy of scale between the corporate and the corporeal, which the architecture fails to mediate, reducing the public from participants in the life of the city to spectators.

The issue of passive spectatorship versus active participation has been at the heart of urban life for the past two centuries. As Richard Sennett has argued at length, this is a fundamental problem of modernity and the dramatic shift in the definition of and

attitude towards public life (Sennett, 1976). Of particular interest is the extent to which the fundamental issues marking ‘the fall of public man’ in the nineteenth century are still at play in our advanced postmodernity. We argue that the appropriation of the public realm – its structure and its very definition, by the corporate ethos or attitude, lies at the heart of this impoverishment.

The ‘disembodied’ spectator and the disempowered citizen are directly linked, through the objectification of their relationship to the space of the city – its physical, intellectual and power structures. The challenge for contemporary organisational processes is to persist with the complex role of structuring space as a realm of interaction and possibility, rather than a closed system. The city as living organisation becomes complete only with its continuous and varied inhabitation. It is through reciprocity and re-enactment that a sense of place and identity emerges.

Merleau-Ponty suggests that our perception of space is not a fixed process of information reception, but a dialectic relationship between the actual and the possible structures of the world, to which the body belongs. In other words, spatial perception simultaneously involves memory and imagination. The engagement with the real and immediate occurs as a constant negotiation with the already known and remembered, on one hand, and the imagined and anticipated, on the other. (Merleau-Ponty, 1962). In that sense, the quality of experience in any spatial context is largely defined by the play between intelligibility and recognition, on one hand, and the richness of possibility and surprise, on the other. That is also where the possibility of identity and meaning resides, and the fundamental distinction between place and non-place.

This is what the *traceurs* do: through their unconventional and extra-ordinary movement, they manipulate the otherwise alienating non-place of the suburbs into becoming something more than it is, into yielding possibilities of engagement and encounter that it wouldn't ordinarily afford. It should not be surprising that, reversing the qualities of the setting, *parkour* becomes a real wonder: it ceases to operate as an 'emergency' measure for shaping the shapeless and interpreting the meaningless, but instead weaves into the architecture to compose a living whole.

Among the most successful and rich 'runs' of the original team of *traceurs*, having become sufficiently well-known to be invited to make televised performances, has been the National Theatre in London ('Jump London', C4 documentary 2003). Designed and built (between 1967-1976) by Sir Denys Lasdun, this is one of the most thoughtful and rich modern public buildings in London. Impossible to appreciate as an object or a picture, the National Theatre is a carefully scaled composition of terraces, walkways, foyers and balconies, forming a varied and open structure that simultaneously celebrates and becomes the city, through perpetual invitations of participation. The deeply embodied character of the building, its striking materiality and spatiality, encourages the enhanced movement of the *traceurs*, and is revealed as a terrain of exceptional possibility and richness.

Insert Picture 9 about here

The *banlieu* is the non-place which is made inhabitable and given a sense of identity, through its appropriation by the *traceurs* and the intense interaction of their bodies with its harsh boundaries. On the other hand, the National Theatre's complex, fluid

and situated spatiality explodes with the potential for further discovery, through the expansive engagement of *parkour*.

In both cases, *Parkour* as an extreme way of place-making through performance emphasises the nature of inhabitation as a continuous, reciprocal action, and its significance for any genuine understanding of both architecture and organisational theory.

Conclusion

Instead of talking about structure, technology or the strategic choices, subjectivist, interpretive approaches have shifted attention to the issue of organisational cultures or subcultures and the ways that individuals construct experiences and make sense of their world. Within this context, the study of symbols, language and stories have during the last few decades provided a framework for analysis and understanding organisational behaviour and individual identities as they are defined and re-defined in ever changing social environments. Yet, the study of spatial ordering and its interrelation to socio-historical processes has remained underdeveloped.

This paper found Lefebvre's (1991) 'lived spaces' and Auge's (1995) 'non-place' in the activities of *traceurs*, and thus brought spatiality in the centre of our understanding of the processes of corporatisation of the city and the possibilities for resistance and otherness. We highlighted the need to invent new metaphors, tell new stories that will assist us in creating 'other spaces' (Foucault, 1986) and a new language through which we can experience corporate space. Space was not viewed as

a static representation of the natural world but as a socially produced dynamic, ‘an “embodiment” and medium of social life itself’ (Soja, 1989: 120).

We proposed the metaphor of *parkour* or ‘free running’ as a form of ‘urban activism’ that poses a challenge to fixed, sterile organisational behaviour, rigid models and ready-made answers. Free running for us opposes the commodification and commercialisation of the human body (and movement) and the institutional control mechanisms embedded in cityscapes. Finally, parkour has been our way of exploring the “thirdspace” (Soja, 1996), a space inhabited and transformed by performance and engagement.

The paper addressed the relationship between place and space, space and the corporation, the city and architecture. We wrote about how these are experienced within ‘global’ contexts and how their interrelationship reflects and generates human consciousness and memory. We proposed that postmodern capitalist politics/attitudes can be identified with those of the corporation, despite the difference in their *raison d’être* and stated aims. Furthermore, we suggested that there is considerable overlap between the problems of the postmodern city and the postmodern workplace, centring on alienation and homogenisation – the latter a seeming paradox in the context of our hyper-pluralist, atomised culture, yet evidently its end result in the form of a blanket consumerism of everything including theories, ideals and emotions.

Corporate design and architecture embody specific kinds of relationships, experiences and perceptions of space and place. Place, space, buildings, boundaries and movement all condition the experience of the City and contribute to the

construction of identities. We do believe that the space in which we live and work affects our thoughts and feelings, our creativity and spontaneity and potentially can affect the way we come to experience social interactions, work activities and self. *Parkour* has provided us with the lens to look for interconnectedness, engagement and possibility within post-modern capitalist environments:

Throughout all of that there's something missing, you sit there with an emptiness, a void. [...] Then, you see Parkour, and I don't really mean just the first time you see PK, but the first time you catch a glimpse of what lies beneath the videos, beneath the moves. It's like a force of nature, something that at first seems disconnected from humanity in a way, because it's inherently human. It goes against all of the preset notions of what mankind is, a separate entity, man against nature, us against the world [...] To me, that's what strikes me as important, not so much some "new" art or sport, but more a return to something that over the centuries we've lost. Something that fills that void' (The Art of Movement, Circular Fluidity, 2004, <http://www.va-parkour.com/>).

Parkour is about the inhabitants' ability to take control of the given space and transform it into a landscape of possibility. We claimed that despite appropriation forces present in corporate discourse and practice, the philosophy of *parkour* continues to offer lenses for seeing the corporate spaces differently and conceptualizing organizational practice in more dialogical ways. This is because *parkour* was conceptualized not as a reactive movement but as an expressive medium of individuals who view the city as a playground. In this sense, possibly some *traceurs* have appropriated their activity and participated in the construction of managerial discourse yet in essence, *parkour* remains a discursive practice that demonstrates the interactivity between body and space, organisations and their participants, cities and their inhabitants.

Thus, the *traceurs* may become instruments of control but parkour as a medium still serves as a liberating metaphor for organizations and their participants towards the celebration of openness, dialogue, creativity and reciprocity. The challenge for architects and organisational theorists is to be inspired by this metaphor and

incorporate some of the messages involved into their everyday practice. We invite management practitioners to engage in a dialectic relationship with academics and other stakeholders without expectations of unique solutions but aiming at the exploration of possibilities through the appreciation of creativity and unconventionality, engagement and enactment, reciprocity and embodiment.

The philosophy of *parkour* is a reminder of the need for producing theory and buildings that are not devoid of dialogue but encourage and embrace the dialogical qualities of everyday organisational practice. It invites practitioners to release themselves from rhetorical representations of organisational life and engage with the realities of diverse and multi-dimensional communities and spaces. Through this paper, we invite our academic communities to recognise that appropriation and adaptation of monolithic descriptions cannot embrace the diversity of human experience and the possibilities arising through interactivity and interconnectedness of practised organisational becoming.

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APPENDICES _ PICTURES



Picture 1: Restricting the body (Ray, photograph)



Picture 2: NY, Times Sq, Authors' picture (2005)



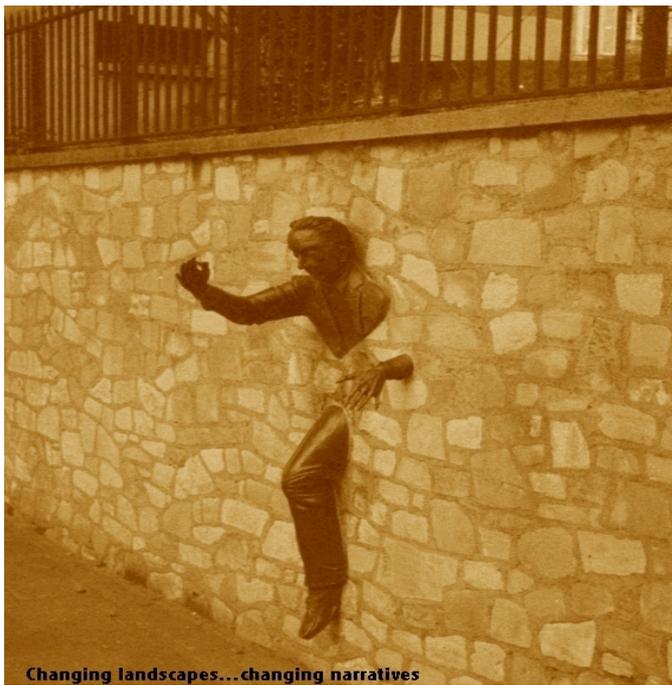
Picture 3: Mathieu Kassovitz film *La Haine* (1995)



Picture 4: Belle, David (co-founder of Parkour)



Picture 5: www.parkour.net (David Belle's homepage)



Changing landscapes...changing narratives

Picture 6: *Montmartre, Paris* [authors' picture, 2003]



Picture 7: Potsdamer Platz, Berlin



Picture 8: National Theatre, London.