

## Original Article

### Parkour – a bridge between motor activities and live-ability practices in the urban jungle

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#### Abstract

The origin of parkour can be dated back to George Hébert's studies. It was created in France and quickly spread around the world. This motor discipline is commonly defined as "*art du déplacement*", and its aim is to adapt one's movements to the surrounding environment, both natural and urban. Parkour transforms towns from still and impersonal spaces into places for creativity, learning, and self-knowledge. In fact, a practitioner (before beginning to move) will continuously wonder about his motivations and his physical perceptions, converse with his fears, and look for his psychophysical balance. In 2019, the Italian Ministry of Health invited to consider unstructured activities to promote active life and make individual and collective gratification elements available. With this aim, parkour (as a mainly sensory–motor discipline) is very useful owing to its educational purposes, in particular when children are involved, because their approach to senses is still free from social and family conditioning. Parkour is a movement practice, which requires considerable physical, mental, and emotional training. We discuss the relationship between parkour and *edgework* (a socio-psychological concept about voluntary risk-taking; Lyng S., 1990) because parkour practitioners are exposed to risks that seem greater than what is socially acceptable. This study analyzes parkour as an outdoor activity, as an expression of *flourishing* (Nussbaum M, 2007) from the point of view of the *urban jungle* and as a denunciation of unsuitability of urbanization for the natural needs of the human being. We confirmed that the *edgework* approach was a very effective tool for practitioners to improve their specific skills and their personal lives. Parkour poses the questions; the practitioner's aim is to find the answers.

**Keywords:** Parkour, urban jungle, movement, environment, Edgework, calculated risk

*„There was a child went forth every day; and the first object he looked upon, that object he became; and that object became part of him for the day or a certain part of the day, or for many years or stretching cycles of years. [...]” Walt Whitman (Leaves of Grass, p.282)*

#### Introduction

For sport sciences, having an epistemological structure constitutes an academically valid viaticum of recognition as a sector of research and scientific study. In contemporary culture, sport sciences constitute a crossroads of problems involving heterogeneous scientific sectors that are even apparently distant from each other. In terms of progress and knowledge spreading, the concepts, theories, and methods applied in research should incorporate interdisciplinary relationships and practice (Castaldo, 2018). As proof of the absolute transversality of their values, sport sciences have also focused on the connection between free time and urbanization (Davies, 2010, 2012; Coalter, 2013; Tallon, 2013; Kozma, 2014; Friedman, 2017) with the theme of *Outdoor Movement Education*.

According to the “World Urbanization Prospects UN 2018”, in 2050, almost 70% of the world population will live in urban areas, mainly in megacities and large suburban areas. Cities continue to exert their potential attraction by offering the best opportunities in terms of individual and social growth (ISTAT, 2017). Paradoxically, in the cities, inequality is evident; wealth is not evenly distributed across the urban space; thus, in the same urban area, wealthy communities and slums coexist (Katz, 2012). In this context, *homo urbanus* was born, representing the first product of urban growth (Rifkin, 2011). *Homo urbanus* is the center of the industrialization/urbanization/free time triangle, which takes into account that in the latter category, sport activities dominate all others.

In this urbanization process, cities provide a “critical mass of potential spectators, media involved in sport promotion, and entrepreneurs recognizing growing public interest, in other words, cities provide the necessary ingredients for the development of sport as a structured activity and viable enterprise. Therefore, the economy imposes its rules: sport becomes both a product and a producer of urban life” (Friedman, 2017). The resulting economic drift will not be devoid of consequences; the productivity–performance model, by

diminishing the playful aspects, betrays one of the educational components of the human being, which Martha Nussbaum described in the *Capability approach*: “Play. Being able to laugh, play and enjoy recreational activities” (2006). This represents a crack in the free-time sector, i.e., sport activities become a means for purely economic purposes rather than for the value-based ones; thus, from actors, people become spectators (Castaldo, 2010). This cultural process includes two other elements, i.e., the advent of new technologies and the establishment of the risk culture. Specifically, electronic games reduce the participation in sports activities, which in 2001 has already reached the lowest point. The preparatory document for the 2004 European Year of Sport states: “People born between 1985 and 1995 largely avoid joining a sport organization in a self-organized form. This generation pays attention to video games and to sport equipment for sports simulations, which provide emotions without risks and efforts. In 2003, the rate of practicing virtual sport among young people between 10 and 25 years old increased to 40%”. Risk becomes the hallmark of the second modernity, of our present. In an advanced industrial society, the social production of wealth is accompanied by the social production of risks, which creates the risk business (Beck 1986).

This concept subtly creeps in, creates restlessness, forms fear and, not infrequently, emotional suggestions. The culture of uncertainty, which is typical of the peasant world, is supplanted by the mirage of the result. In this cultural context, “no risk” pedagogical approaches arise, which have led to the inhibition of many spare-time activities, especially sports activities. In this regard, Gill (2007) has stated that there is a shrinking freedom of action for children in the West, a growing control by adults, a sort of deprivation of experience that may help them negotiate tricky social situations better, especially during adolescence. The lack of experiences in autonomy and freedom with the possibility of risks has negative repercussions on the well-being of young people, which causes discomfort and a sense of inadequacy to face new situations.

### Materials and Methods

We need to be able to spend “freely our free time”. A good idea is to practice sport activities free from economic-production constraints, performance models, or that require high skills and creativity. These activities can be named *not-stereotyped* activities, which are sports specialties in which the perfect technical execution is of secondary importance with respect to the control of environmental unstable factors and to the individual and/or collective strategic choices (Scotton, 2004). This concept has been confirmed in a document published by the Italian Ministry of Health in 2019, which invites to consider unstructured activities to promote an active lifestyle and individual and collective gratifications (MIS, 2019; p.24).

In this framework, the characteristics of parkour are defined. Its origin may be traced back to George Hebert’s studies about native Africans moving freely in relation to the surrounding nature (G.H., 1875-1957, French teacher, he was influenced by the reflections of J.J. Rousseau on the “good savage”. He gave structure to the “natural method”, describing it as a system, the result of the sum of physical, moral and virile strength, which is expressed on an organic, energetic, motivational, and sensorial levels). His “physical training obstacle course” has become the basis for military training programs and fitness and corporate training courses; he invented his personal motto “Be strong to be useful”. This type of training rapidly spread outside the military field until a group of French people gave structure to this activity and developed alternative movements. At the beginning of 2000, the spectacularity of these movements attracted the attention of young people and mass media. Therefore, parkour experienced a widespread popularity, and movies and television programs were produced on this subject.

In 2008, the first training program for parkour instructors was developed, which released an official certification (ADAPT), which is also mandatory in Italy. Starting from 2016, in UK, parkour has been officially recognized as a sport. In 2017, FIG (Fédération Internationale de Gymnastique) defined parkour as a discipline of gymnastics. These decisions aimed to include parkour in the Olympic games, giving rise to controversies in the international practicing community owing to the contradiction with the basic principles of this activity. Regulation of parkour would reduce it to a competitive practice and make it a purely mechanic activity and a quest for maximum performance.

This study presents parkour as a link, a provocation; it evokes, explains, and allows to see urban area’s live-ability in a different way, always respecting but also enjoying. In addition, parkour is a meeting point of the vision of sustainable architecture and *Outdoor Movement Education*, especially for the “active cities” design. Living the *urban jungle* can be difficult and sometimes stressful if the outside environment does not accept us or is different from our expectations. However, we can choose integrated solutions, which imply active participation, modification of our attitude, being responsible when acting and expressing ourselves and our emotions. This involves practicing sports by oneself and with other people, trying to know each other and the urban area even if it is unusual, excessive, or insipid. All of the above allows us to take actions to activate the relational component, to get involved with neighbors and nearby people. Movement is the simplest way to do it, and we believe that it is the most effective, cheapest, most immediate, and more attractive approach. We are defining a scenario in which a person will no longer suffer the urban structure; by changing the perception, his/her movement will be adapted to the “plastic” urban structure.

Possible places where this representation can be realized are the “informal spaces” where, even if there is no equipment, it is possible to practice movements and play without cost or access limitations. We are talking

about urban parks and green areas, residual or marginal areas, uncultivated or abandoned areas, open spaces that are rarely used or to be recovered. In such places, the following types of activities can be considered worthy of attention, i.e., "... activities that are not framed or defined as sports, are not games, but are practiced in a fun way and have interesting characteristics relating to the environment in which they are realized. In some cases, indeed, it is precisely the environment that determines the expression of skill, sometimes a very particular skill such as parkour, street dance, hip-hop, juggling, and clownery. In their own way, all of the abovementioned activities stimulate neuromuscular structures and contribute to the structuring of high-level sports skills. These abilities (although they are specific for each framework of development, environment, and tools used) can and must be considered as a substantial improvement for many "canonical" disciplines that further improve coordinative, conditional, and functional aspects" (Mango P., 2018, p.112).

Regarding parkour, we can say that participating in this activity improves the relationship between people with the environment and, in particular, with the architectural or natural surroundings; this aspect is the object of study and observation and non-invasive use.

Compared to other disciplines, parkour does not change or modify places where it is practiced. It allows to integrate the practitioner with the environment; by adopting an attitude of full respect, it is possible to enjoy the characteristics of places. These areas are consistent with the bodies of people who practice there and are in full harmony and balance both with the levels of ability and with the physical, motivational, intellectual, and emotional characteristics of each participant.

"Parkour is practiced using open skills, which makes it for all intended purposes more similar to a situation-sport"; moreover, "many practitioners will gain benefits from the use of parkour-specific approach to their everyday life" (Calefato A., 2016, p.6). In fact, an outdoor practice using spaces and equipment that are not coded guarantees to the practitioners an opportunity to have special experiences and influence them to search for a motor solution to overcome an obstacle regardless of its nature.

Parkour is a motor discipline in which movement fits the surrounding urban or natural environment. Usually, it is defined as *art du déplacement (arte dello spostamento)*. It is practiced on urban or natural free paths where architectural and non-architectural impediments become possible obstacles to be overcome. The choice of the path and movements to perform belongs to the practitioner, who is the only player. Indeed, parkour does not impose strict rules because environmental adaptation automatically becomes the expression of what the *traceur* feels capable of achieving at that moment, considering all the possible variables, both autogenous and heterogeneous. For Dan Edwardes (founder of *Parkour Generations*, which is a big organization that deals with the spreading of this discipline), parkour "is a discipline which leads to self-improvement on all levels, an art that reveals your physical and mental limits and offers you a way to overcome them. It is a return to a more natural way of moving and a method to unlock the enormous potential hidden in you" (Calefato A. 2016, p.4). To complete this definition, Sébastien Foucan (one of parkour founders) states that parkour "allows you to express yourself in the surrounding environment without limits, it is the art of movement and action" (Calefato A. 2016, p.4). Practicing parkour defines a new and different way of understanding places, structures, trees, other people, footholds, and ground. One learns that respect of the environment and self-respect evolve together.

"In parkour, the respect of the practitioner is for:

- **him/herself**, by an adequate workload management, definition of real expectations, and care for specific motivations;
- **of others**, being tolerant towards different opinions, character, and level of performance of other trainees, and be respectful of passengers or animals who may be there at that moment;
- **of the environment where he/she is**, investing in places and walls calls for healthy and creative activity, as if the world represented his/her home, his/her gym" (Calefato A., 2016, p.6, modificato).

One of the founders, Laurent Piemontesi, compares the practice of parkour to an iceberg; he states that "... what we can plainly see is the smaller portion of the practice. The hidden part is the most voluminous and important" (Calefato A. 2016, p.1). He also states that "it is a complete artistic and sporting discipline, whose goal is to overcome obstacles by walking or running along a predefined path or not, using three basic forms of movement: running, jumping, climbing" (Calefato A. 2016, p.3).

It is clear that this discipline is highly educational; it improves or strengthens *Life Skills* (WHO/MNH/PSF/93.7A.Rev.2). In this context, the following attributes are essential:

- **Decision-making**. Choices are constantly made during practice. Before starting a movement sequence, the *traceur* quickly checks the specific motivations, perception of his/her physical state, and possession of necessary abilities;
- **Problem-solving**. Training includes exercises that stimulate the learning of *open skills*, which is an indispensable tool to face unforeseeable conditions and is proper for a situational discipline;
- **Creativity**. Creativity is highlighted by the possibility of different movement in relation to the environmental variability and is directly connected to problem-solving;
- **Self-awareness**. The continuous training in decision-making leads even young people to correctly compare their personal level of skill with the external problem;

- **Emotion management.** Fear, for example, is essential for human survival; the *traceur* experiences this emotion most frequently. Recognizing, accepting, and expressing it without worry, allows one to learn how to use this energy to achieve a movement;
- **Stress management.** The *traceur* learns to ration his/her time by keeping in touch with all of its organic functions. For example, he decides to stop training when he/she feels that he/she is not in the mood; he/she waits for the right moment to perform a movement; he/she uses breathing as a tool to focus on the here and now.

Foucan (2008) writes: “obstacles are enemies that can have different nature: physical, mental, social... When an obstacle blocks your jump, you are forced to face your fears. The way you react to those fears will make you who you are. Obstacles and difficulties make you stronger when you decide to face them. And remember that there is always a way to learn from successes and failures”.

The edgework’s concept is refined by Lyng (Lyng S., 1990, pp. 851-886), who described the attitude of those who take risks that appear to be higher than standard risks accepted by society. However, it is necessary to differentiate the perception of risk of those who are performing the activity and those who are observing it. If the *traceur* decides to proceed, it means that he has already performed the risk assessment. The real risk rating is defined in relation to factors such as the physical condition, technical preparation, and the mental state of the person. For example, let us think about going upstairs and downstairs. For careless people or for those who do not walk properly, this activity can be considered a high-risk activity, which may lead to serious consequences; instead, the risk may be low for people who are healthy and focused on the task (Calefato A., 2017, pp. 78-79). Therefore, risk belongs to a single person, and the practice of parkour can improve physical and mental abilities; parkour has to be performed safely. Moreover, compared to basketball and volleyball players, *traceur* is able to reduce the load while landing on the ground up to 60% using specific techniques such as landings or rolls (Puddle D. L., & Maulder, P. S., 2013, p.122). In addition, the assessment and mitigation of risks using parkour techniques allows the *traceur* to train outside the *comfort zone* (see Figure 1). The goal of the *traceur* is to recognize the *optimal performance zone*, to improve the “life skills” (World Health Organization, 2003), which allows him/her to face challenges of everyday life. In comparison, the *danger zone* exposes the *traceur* to high risk and requires specific physical preparation and great awareness.



Figure 1 – Stress zone level diagram (White A., 2009)

On the border between *Optimal performance* and *Danger zones*, it is possible to discover the intrinsic educational potential of the parkour practice. The choice of which obstacle to overcome is up to the *traceur*; this highlights his/her sense of responsibility, including predicting the consequences of his behavior and the possibility of adjusting it (Calabrò G.P., 2010).

## Results

Youth is our future, and the future is under siege. If neglected, future generations will have to face global challenges without precedents, and many people are deeply rooted in cities.

Renzo Piano states: “Our century ruins the city: this great invention of man. It has polluted its positive values, has altered the mixture of functions that are at the base: the same sociality that is its distinctive character and also the architectural quality” (Piano R. & Cassignoli R., pp. 37-38). The movie *Homo Urbanus*, produced by Béka and Lemoine in 2019, is interesting in this regard. It was filmed in ten major cities to understand how humans built their “living” and how they adapted to the megalopolis. Following the beginning of Whitman’s poetry, *homo urbanus* infuses it into *urban jungle*.

Parkour coexists with the design of urban spaces for physical movements and outdoor sports. At the same time, philosophically speaking, parkour is also the opposite: it uses what the city offers, according to the imagination and personal skills. However, in the urban jungle, is *flourishing* visible in action? We believe that

through unconventional creative expression, the sense of freedom prospers inside the urban concrete. This is the aim of the *outdoor movement education*, and parkour is a good example. Then, the *on the edge* approach is what makes parkour an inherently educational outdoor discipline, because the *traceur* can freely live the motivations that support him to choose what, when, and how to act. Thus, he continually questions himself and his perception of reality, in a continuous dance between order and chaos, between what is socially accepted and what is not. Against this background, the risk, which exists, is a matter of “I am able to do it”.

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