

## Tracing The Traceur

### Architecture photography as an optic of knowing

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#### Abstract

This essay is a photographic exploration of parkour, tracing the experience of the traceur through the gaze of the architect, reflecting upon how photography can destabilize the point of views architecture operates from, and thereby expand the narratives on architecture possible to trace through photography.

**Keywords:** Architecture photography, parkour, urban materiality, visual practice

Alongside Barbican Art Gallery's and ArkDes' exhibition *Constructing Worlds. Architecture and Photography* (2014) came a publication with an essay by David Company. The essay discusses photography as a distinct mode of representation and places the exhibited work in relation to different photographic attitudes towards the built that can be traced through the biography of photography. The strong ties between camera technology and the 'immobility' of built environment, giving architecture a special status within photography, is well documented (Baldwin, 2013; Elwall, 2004; Robinson & Herschman, 1987). But in the essay a rhetoric figure also emerges, a figure that is important when thinking of architectural practice and its ability to perceive (urban) experiences located outside its own.

Drawing on Walter Benjamin, Company states that even though photography is incapable of capturing a building as such (since it is intimately linked to ownership and use), photography can "isolate, interpret, exaggerate

or even invent a cultural value" based on buildings. Company also suggests that it is in fact these cultural values that constitute architecture and therefore they cannot be separated from photography. Architecture is in such an understanding not identical to the objects (buildings, urban spaces, landscapes etc) generated by an architectural practice, but a specific way of looking, thinking and shaping these objects which in turn is interlinked with the methods, techniques and materialities that constitute a certain optics.

The exhibition *Constructing Worlds* gathers photographic work and photographers that to a various degree – and often overlapping – bridges over the documentary (Evans, Becher), artistic (Sugimoto, Lambri), commercial (Schulman) and anthropological (Kander, Baan). And even though they are sorted under the exhibition theme architecture, they depart from positions outside of architecture's own. In the sense that all works have buildings or built environment as the photographic object,

the sorting under architecture is both self-evident and uncontroversial. But if the selected work is studied in relation to the photographic images that circulate within the discipline of architecture and the professional group that produces (built) architecture the selection becomes less obvious.

Photography and its emergence within architecture is interconnected with the materials, technologies and distribution systems developed parallel to photography's shifts in development and reproduction, in other words the production and distribution of books, magazines and newspapers. These connections are still strong, and nowadays it is above all (architecture) magazines that act as prime distributors of conceptions revealing what is considered interesting, innovative and relevant architecture. In this, photography – the images of architecture – play a vital part in how the discipline and profession define their objects. Since magazines do not have the financial means in order to directly engage those that deliver images of published building projects, it is mostly the architects themselves that commission photographers for their own publication on websites and potential magazines or books. Thus, the view on architecture that is being reproduced is that of the architect, marked by her (idealized) conceptions rather than meanings that can be drawn from either the building's lived context or other visual practices. When images are so tightly tied to a specific sender, architecture photography not only tends to reduce itself to some kind of commercial photography. It also runs the risk of reproducing the architectural profession's conceptions of which cultural values that are encompassed in the concept architecture. What is sorted under the label *architecture photography* is thereby not only an indication of what kind of photography we are talking about but also of what is defined as (good) architecture.

Thus, architecture photography has had a peculiar ability to not only silence other positions but also to black box and naturalize its own. The architect's gaze is thereby disentangled from its 'body' and acts as if it could see "everything from nowhere" (Haraway 1991). In doing so, architecture photography cements a common misconception within architecture profession

and education of architecture as 'timeless' and free from ideological, social and cultural dependencies (Till 2009). This bodiless gaze has also found its way into the computer rendered images which mimic the photograph by using the camera's photo points, focal lengths, focus points and converging vertical lines, but also by imitating architecture photography's most classical motif: the building when it is just completed. Not uncommonly these images manifest themselves early in the architectural design process and regarding the impact photographic looking had on 20th century modernistic architecture and the emergence of what Claire Zimmerman (2014) calls *photographic architecture*, it is still important to examine what aesthetics and thereby what power relations operate through the architect's gaze.

In order to widen the optics of architecture photography – and thereby its knowledge of how architecture is experienced and made use of – this essay presents a photographic exploration of parkour and reflect upon what it means to switch from the optics of an architect to the optics of the *traceur*.<sup>1</sup> Architecture photography is in the context of the essay not defined on the basis of a particular sender (architect or traceur) or whether it is part of a certain genre (art or architecture). Rather it is used as a tool for investigating how a shift in optics can capture the multiple experiences of urban everyday environments and the role photography plays in the making and shaping of urban subcultures, such as parkour.

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1 - The photographic study was done during the work on my thesis *Arkitekturens kroppslighet. Staden som terräng* (Nilsson 2010) and some of the images presented here are part of that publication. However, in the thesis the photographs answered to a different aim than they do in this essay. Here they are rearranged, accompanied by other previously not published and (re)interpreted from the objectives of TELE SCOPE, an ongoing artistic research project on architectural photography.



**Figure 1** - Lisses / Evry Courcouronne, October 2009



**Figure 2** - Lisses / Evry Courcouronne, October 2009



**Figure 3** - Lisses / Evry Courcouronne, October 2009



**Figure 4** - Lisses / Evry Courcouronne, October 2009



**Figure 5** - Lisses / Evry Courcouronne, October 2009

Architecture photography is a practice built around vision, embedded in a particular way of observing spatialities, materialities and temporalities. It is *scopic*. If you follow the greek roots of the word you will find that scopic can be understood as an "instrument for looking" (*skopein*). The camera acts like an instrument that enables for a certain kind of observations, but it is an observation which requires an observer (an eye) that directs its gaze and chooses a specific part of the world. The part chosen – the view – is not a neutral one. It presupposes a *point of view* which in turn is fixed by the horizon of understanding from which the looking operates (Bärtås, 2006). Architecture photography is thus characterized by choosing motif, framings, demarcations and focus based on the architecture discipline's conceptions of space, material, time and process.

Similarly, the gaze of the traceur is embedded in a specific way of observing and making use of urban materialities. As part of a larger affinity such as parkour the traceur isolates, interprets, exaggerates and invents cultural values based on buildings and built environments. Though the experiences accumulated within the traceur are incorporated by a highly bodily encounter with the built they are also visually produced. The scopic practice of parkour not only shapes the affinity from within, it also gives access to those *outside* of parkour and makes it possible to trace their actions and favoured urban materialities. One of the more charged places of parkour is Lisses, the Parisian suburb where parkour was invented.



**Figure 6** - Lisses / Evry Courcouronne, October 2009



**Figure 7** - Lisses / Evry Courcouronne, October 2009



**Figure 8** - Lisses / Evry Courcouronne, October 2009

*A Parkour Expedition. 2009. 7:35 minuter.*



*Daniel Ilabaca - Trip to Lisses. 2006. 5:29 minuter.*



*Carlos & Christian Trip to Lisses. 2007. 6:48 minuter.*



**Figure 9** - Screenshots from selected online parkour movies (Nilsson, 2010)

Besides being an instrument for looking, the scopic can also be read as to "spy/watch from a distance" (*skopós*). Architectural practice mainly spy and watch through orthogonal plan projections, based on different measure factors, that cut through the built in horizontal and vertical directions. Drawing is a planar projection that flattens the world in order to make visible contact surfaces otherwise hard to depict or understand. And in the same way as x-ray vision makes it possible to observe and gain knowledge of complex relations and dependencies, architectural orthogonal drawings enable architecture to understand and elaborate complex spatial configurations otherwise impossible to think of.

These planar projections not only allow for architectural practice to watch, but also to act from a distance. Thus, architectural practice is not only scopic – it is *telescopic* – in the sense that its methods and techniques both bridge distances and establish new ones. The telescopic character of drawing is a quality it shares with photography and this is particularly visible in the optics of parkour, where the practice of photographing or filming one's movements and sharing them on various websites not only makes parkour recognizable and understandable for non-traceurs. They have also established parkour as a distinct activity outside of Lisses.



**Figure 10** - Lund, July 2009

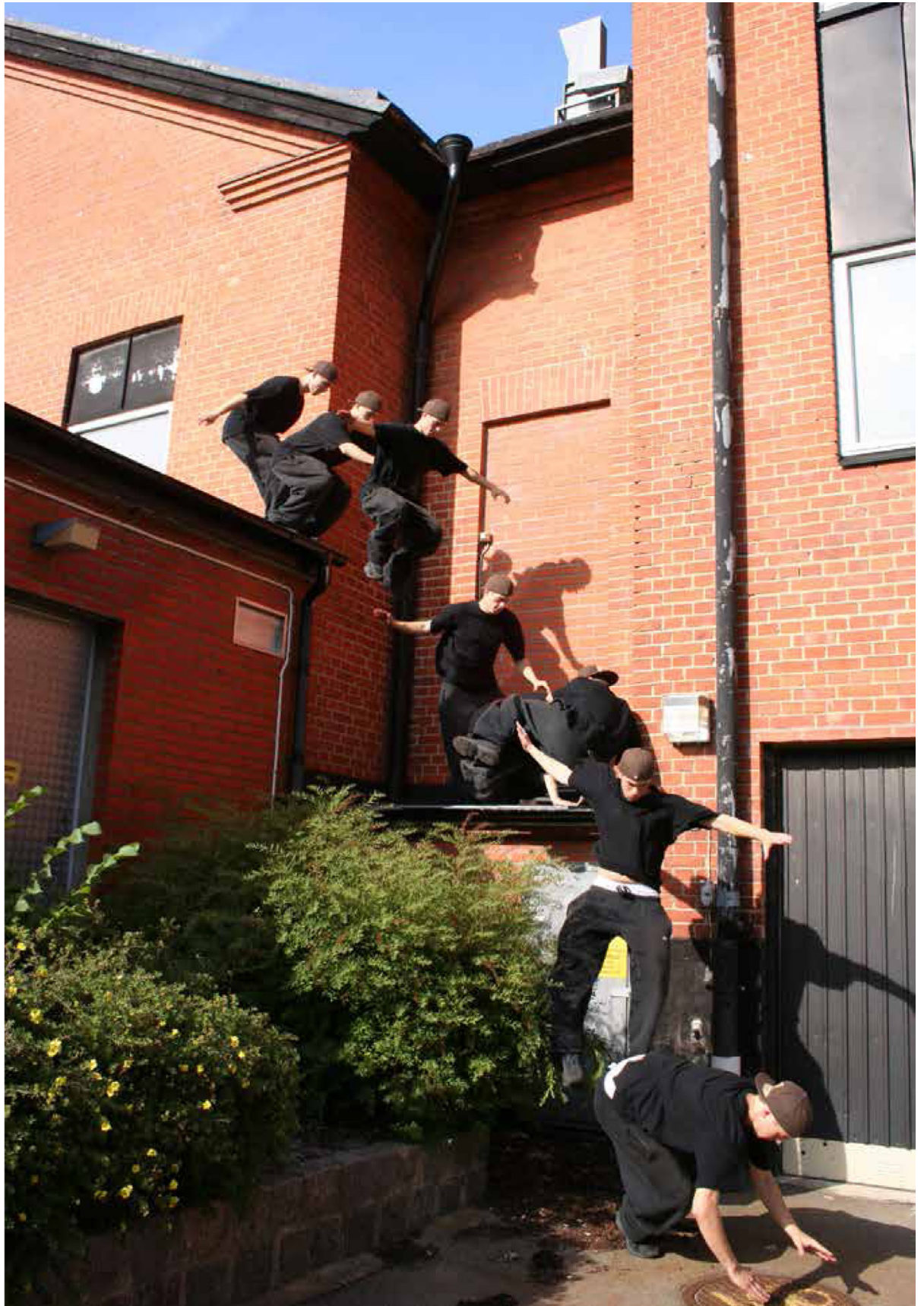


Figure 11 - Lund, April 2010



**Figure 12** - Lund, July 2009



Figure 13 - Lund, April 2010



**Figure 14** - Lund, July 2009



**Figure 15** - Lund, July 2009



**Figure 16** - Lund, July 2009

Whereas drawing above all describes spatial relations as if they were independent of time, photography is more transparent in showing that a disposition in space also implies a disposition of time (Latour, 1997; Law, 2002). When following a group of traceurs during their one day *summer-jam* in Lund I did not only adopt the praxis of documenting their activity. I also manipulated the photographs in ways common to parkour, by superimposing the traceur's movements into one image. These photo montages underline that the traceur not only articulates a specific body and its technical skills. The traceur also articulates an architectural situation.

Through 'multiple exposures' like this (new) chronologies and chorologies can be created that begin to destabilize the point of views architecture operates from, and thereby also expand the narratives on architecture possible to trace through photography. With the experience of documenting parkour in action, I returned to their spots with my camera but now directing its gaze from the point of view of the traceur.



**Figure 17** - Lund, April 2010



**Figure 18** - Lund, April 2010



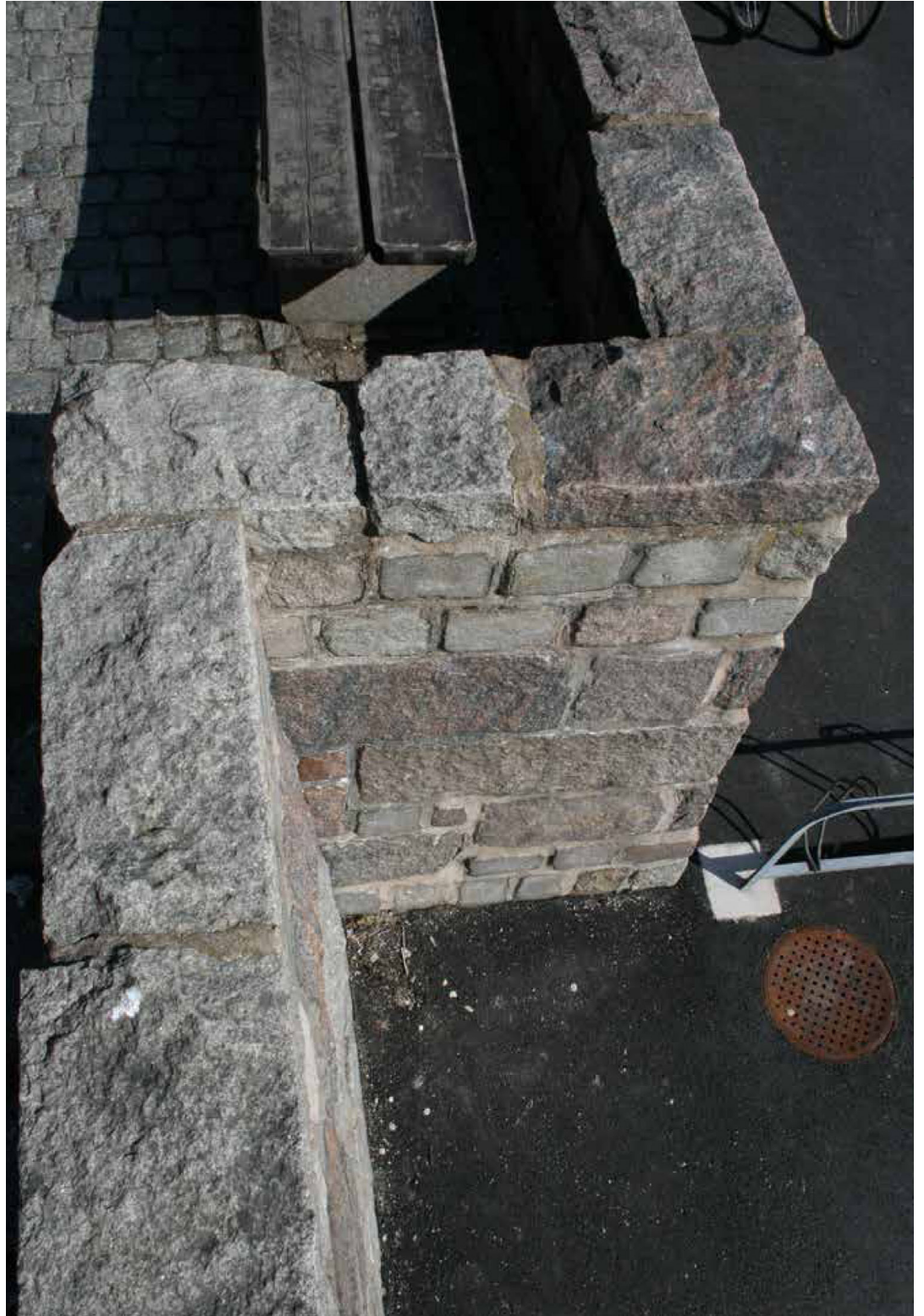
**Figure 19** - Lund, April 2010



**Figure 20** - Lund, April 2010



**Figure 21** - Lund, April 2010



**Figure 22** - Lund, April 2010



**Figure 23** - Lund, April 2010

But who is the traceur looking through the camera's lens? And, what kind of experiences could be traced through the choice of motifs, framings, demarcations and focus?

Rather than a specific bodily experience it is an interpreted one, quite akin to the ways architectural practice operate in order to imagine the possible use and users of an architecture that is not yet (Kopljar, 2016). Above all they show a possible (and meaningful) gaze on buildings, urban materialities and how they can be interpreted. But for them to act not merely as an *optic of seeing* but also as an *optic of knowing*, the material figures depicted in the images have to be connected to the other spatialities, materialities and temporalities of parkour's *terrain* (Nilsson, 2010, 2018) <sup>2</sup>.

The photographic material presented in this essay can be differentiated as three distinct methodological approaches: *archaeological* (traces of past narratives), *anthropological* (formations of cultural values) and *architectural* (spatial and material configurations). They all deal with material culture but carry some distinctions in how they trace the articulation of for instance traceurs and the urban materialities of parkour. Together they make visible that in order to understand the 'user experiences' of parkour one has to acknowledge how this is simultaneously a highly personal, individual production of experiences part of a broader affinity with a specific, though continuously negotiated understanding of what it is to be a traceur. Lisses is present in the situated movement up a particular configuration of walls, as is the collective of individual experiences in Lisses. In this, photography plays a vital part. Not only in the shaping of urban experiences, such as the traceurs'. Parkour photography also makes visible a different way of articulating architectural objects and their meaning. Incorporating their optics into architecture photography is a way to widen its understanding of the roles architecture plays in shaping (multiple) urban experiences.

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2 - A more thorough discussion on the different roles architecture play in the shaping of traceurs and parkour culture can be followed in my thesis (Nilsson 2010) and my contribution to the anthology *Urban Walls* (Brighenti & Kärrholm 2018).



**Figure 24** - Lund, July 2009



**Figure 25** - Lisses / Evry Courcouronne, October 2009

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All photographs and montages by the author.