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VIEWPOINT

Buildering: barely even a thing

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Fig. 1. Grant Stewart. University of British Columbia, Vancouver. Picture by the author.

Often frivolous and whimsical, urban climbing has a rich history. Contrary to popular assumption, the phenomenon is neither an offshoot of parkour nor a by-product of the recent trend of rooftop exploration and its resultant photography. Whilst it overlaps extensively, urban climbing has its own characteristics, community and style. Contemporary exponents often use the term *buildering*, a portmanteau of 'buildings' and 'bouldering', the latter being a discipline of climbing that focuses on short, difficult ascents that require powerful moves. Many sports and activities are esoteric and autotelic, and bouldering is perhaps the apogee of climbing's absurdity given that the majority of ascents can be achieved by simply walking up the other side of a boulder rather than seeking out

a series of nooks and crannies in which to wedge fingers and toes and repeatedly rub chalk.

Buildering takes this esotericism even further. Given its niche appeal and scarcity of practitioners, it is typically an informal, ephemeral, sometimes inadvertently subversive, unstructured activity. Unlike parkour, climbing, or other urban social formations (Daskalaki and Mould, 2013) such as skateboarding, it is barely even a "thing". It lacks the coherency or identifiable traits of larger, more structured sports and activities, and practitioners take great pleasure in its obscurity and slipperiness. It's rare to see buildering suffer from Freud's narcissism of small differences, perhaps as instances of its practice are so infrequent or inadvertent that people rarely seek to define themselves through it and therefore don't seek a sense of ownership over it. Urban social formations often lack coherency, none more so than buildering; there is no identifiable community and exponents may drift in and out of participation, sometimes without realising. One might assume from this that buildering is emergent, yet to become a fully formed and identifiable practice. If that is the case then buildering has been emergent for more than a century, and seems no more fully formed than when Winthrop-Young et al published the first buildering guidebook - *The Roof Climbers Guide to Trinity* - in 1900.

In addition to its elusiveness, buildering is also a broad term that leaves itself open to further definition. The word describes: short, hard ascents that require repeated attempts, gymnastic strength and extensive experience of climbing movements; the scaling of skyscrapers where repetitive but comparatively easy movements result in certain death in the event of a mistake; drunken scrambles up scaffolding on the way home from an evening of inebriation; and everything in between. Whilst parkour has seen its community engage for more than twenty years in extensive arguments over its definition and even the name of the practice itself, buildering prompts no such passions nor vociferous dissection of details. If you can ask 'Is this buildering?' then it probably is. And if it is not buildering, then it doesn't matter.

Practitioners deliberately misinterpret architecture, finding new ways of using both public and private space. The built environment presents opportunities and climbers bring investments of meaning to brickwork, drainpipes, changes in angles, architectural flourishes and surfaces. A playful reimagination is achieved; imagined futures are enacted and recorded, and the praxis produces a fresh set of urban features. For a brief moment, a ledge becomes a *crimp*, a protruding brick becomes a *sidepull*, a drainpipe becomes a *layback*. Routes otherwise unknown and unseen come temporarily into existence. There is a unique appreciation of mundane features; the geometries and textures contain potential. The opportunity to play out an idealised version of oneself emerges, with practitioners drawing inspiration from superhero mythology and, through digital archiving, creating a spectacle that becomes a record of one's accomplishment.

Whilst its visual culture might suggest an over-indulgence in heroic posturing, buildering's reality is characterised by silliness and frivolity, almost a balance to the occasional egotism of its practitioners. However impressive an ascent, there is something inescapably idiotic about scaling low walls or tall buildings, even more so when one considers that there are endless boulders and mountains for climbers to seek out, never mind the purpose-built indoor facilities now available. Becoming obsessed and emotionally involved with an otherwise unremarkable stretch of concrete is undeniably daft. This is reflected in buildering's earliest literature, as evidenced in another of Winthrop-Young's publications.

Fig. 2 (on the left) Self-portrait. Haggerston, London.
Fig. 3 (on the right) Meg Anderson. University of British Columbia, Vancouver.
Pictures by the author.

He writes:

> *The change of centuries has brought no cessation in the perennial pestering as to the nature of this climbing infatuation. The unenlightened still press with old-time pertinacity for a logical exposition of the instinct which induces rational beings to spread themselves over knobby countries or polish uncomfortable walls; mountaineers have long abandoned the attempt to answer, and wallers may imitate their compassionate shrug.*
> Winthrop-Young, 2013, p. 106

It is perhaps no wonder that he then goes on to cite Lear's *Nonsense Verses* when describing the desire to scale man-made walls, a tone that dominates the entire book. Notable also is the subtitle: *Including illuminating appendices on furniture, tree, and haystack climbing* - silliness was inherent to buildering's earliest manifestations. Even the practitioner responsible for many of buildering's grandest ascents and climber of countless skyscrapers, Alain Robert, demonstrates an awareness with amused understatement:

> *Authorities arrest me, release me, and then invite me back to host public events.*
> *I think it's interesting.*
> Robert, n.d.

For all of its silliness, this play also has a seriousness to it. Practitioners are engaging in edgework, discovering "new possibilities of being" (Lyng, 2004: 4) deliberately encountering fear, negotiating risk through rehearsed skill, and deriving great satisfaction as a result. Exponents publicly deviate from normative behaviour, subverting social conventions of how one should conduct oneself in public. Buildering's legality is frequently questionable, though its transgressions are characterised by naughtiness rather than malice or recklessness. These physical interventions radically insert the body into the urban landscape, bringing alternative meanings to the city, and making it a site for autotelic experimentation and earnest play. This irreverence democratises the space, recodifying the urban landscape according to human, localised terms, and allowing an unmediated, embodied experience of the built environment.
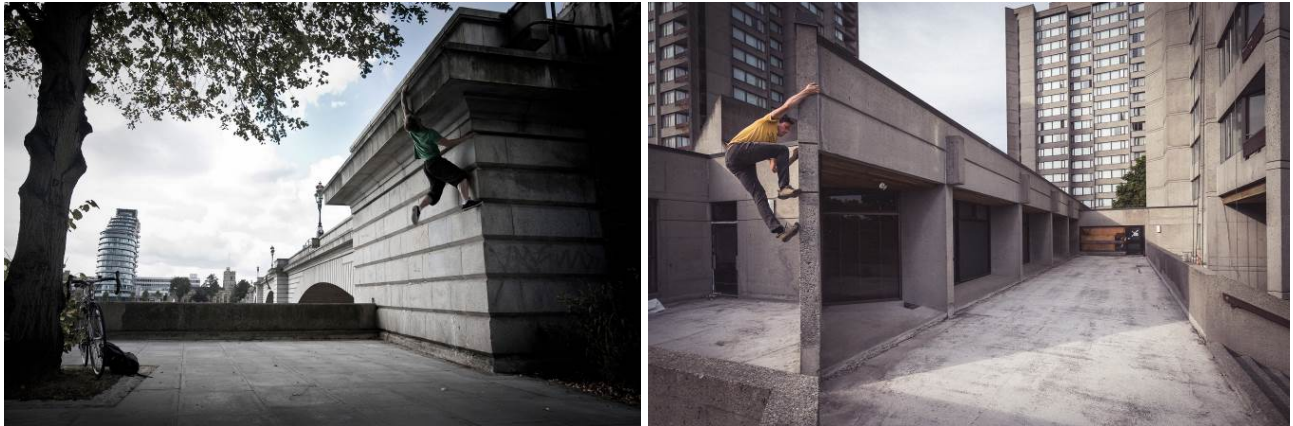
Fig. 4 (on the left) Bobby Gordon-Smith. Putney Bridge, London.
Fig. 5 (on the right) Ard Arvin. University of British Columbia, Vancouver.
Pictures by the author.

The wilderness of nature isolates the mountaineer; for the builderer, the city watches intently, creating a spectacle that is occasionally exploited commercially. Whilst skateboarding and parkour become co-opted and shaped by commercialism, buildering, to a degree, somehow resists, being dropped by companies as quickly as it is picked up. Buildering is no doubt a product of the processes of late capitalism with its proto-white middle-class young males curating identity and individuality through the transgressive behaviour of their able bodies; however, most of the time, its slipperiness manages to keep commercialism at arm's length. Its innate stupidity and indeterminacy allow it to maintain a degree of authenticity that makes its spectacle ultimately unsaleable beyond its occasional use as a novelty. Buildering resists change through an inertia generated by its own obscurity.

London offers endless opportunities to the keen builderer. Dense housing estates present varied terrain without the intense stares and surveillance of the city centre. Bridges across the Thames create classic lines with the promise of a footpath at the summit plus the bonus of some steps to get back down. Victorian railway bridges create a lattice of brickwork with cracks just big enough for fingertips, and hand and foot placements made available through the crumbling of cement, albeit with the ever-present threat of further disintegration.

Statues and public art installations offer intriguing challenges. And the capital's endless construction work brings countless cranes and endless scaffolding. These become nocturnal ladders to otherwise inaccessible vistas and an opportunity to discover what Ballard calls "an environment built, not for man, but for man's absence" (1977).

My adventures over the last ten years have been sporadic and spontaneous. A handful of my friends share locations, and explorations tend to coincide with good weather and having nothing better to do. As the project in London grew, it overlapped into my travels elsewhere, such as the two weeks spent in Vancouver trying to create an updated version of the climbing guide for University of British Columbia that members of the Varsity Outdoors Club published in 1965[1]. Photography is bound up as part of the encounter rather than feeling as though it is something that is separate and distinct, or demanding a different mode of behaviour. Through the internet, we sometimes stumble across fellow practitioners, oblivious to their existence until randomly finding their exploits on *YouTube* or *Instagram*.

Fig. 6 (on the left) Richard Bartlett. Southwark Bridge, London.
Fig. 7 (on the right) Grant Stewart. University of British Columbia, Vancouver.
Pictures by the author.

The *#buildering* hashtag has suddenly enabled connections that were previously impossible and whilst the community (if it can be called that) feels a little bigger as a result, it seems no less fragmented.

Ours is another example of buildering's haphazard history, whereby instances materialise only to then evaporate. Our website, *buildering.net*, has offered a degree of stability since it was founded in 2001, but updates are random and irregular. More broadly, buildering has appeared and disappeared intermittently since Winthrop-Young's publications in the early twentieth century, sometimes manifesting in the typewritten, risographed guidebooks complete with hand-drawn diagrams produced by members of student mountaineering societies. Examples include those designed for the campuses of University of Wyoming (1950s), and Stanford University (1970s). Most buildering goes unnoticed and unrecorded and, most likely, buildering has taken place since buildings have existed. And, as our experience proves, the majority of builderers remain largely oblivious of their fellow practitioners. Whenever we establish a first ascent, we feel like pioneers, albeit ones whose feats will remain largely unrecognised, of value only to ourselves and a handful of others, and potentially a repetition of some unknown ascensionist who happened to get there first.

Starting as a specific project, my buildering photography is now open-ended, relying on a loose network of friends who occasionally spot new projects or find parts of London – and the world – that seem ripe for exploration. Hopefully the work acts as a reminder that cities are not just sites of commercialism, consumption and commuting, but also places that have the potential for pragmatic anarchy (Ward, 1973), embodied experiences, personalised interpretation, irreverence, play, and experimentation, offering authentic encounters in the midst of an increasingly homogenized, mediated urban existence.

Notes

(1) For more information: http://www.buildering.net/2014/08/13/buildering-a-dream/.

Fig. 8 (on the left) Juho Kuusisaari. Pasila, Helsinki.
Fig. 9 (on the right) Ola Taistra. Trasa Łazienkowska, Warsaw.
Pictures by the author.

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Biography

Andy Day is an internationally published photographer specialising in adventure sports, travel, architectural and landscape photography. He has been photographing physical interaction with the city since 2003. Through participant-observation, Andy's work examines the body's relationship with the built environment, wilful misuse of architecture, subversive practices, appropriation of space and place, edgework and social interaction. His photographs have had a significant role in shaping the visual culture of parkour and free-running. With an MA in Photography from Goldsmiths, he also speaks, teaches and writes about the sociology of urban space.

After living in east London for ten years, Andy now bases himself in rural Bulgaria and spends much of his time travelling. His portfolio is available at andyday.com, his archive at kiell.com.

He also co-runs buildering.net and is always grateful for new content.

Andy is a proud member of the Urban Photographers Association and Crossing Lines.