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Assignment #2: “Up, Down, on the Ground”

As social animals, humans are ever conscious of hierarchy. Social position, or at least the individual’s perception of his/her relationship to “the group” – to other individuals sketched anonymous and en masse, the atom to the molecule – is readily, consistently translated from the intangible social into clear-cut slicing of space. In cities, social metaphor becomes crystallized in the design and construction of buildings. And much of this crystallization occurs along the vertical “z-axis” in space.

However, with shifts in cultural values and technology, the perceived social value of being located “up, down, or on the ground” shifts as well.

Pre-20th century European urban consciousness favored a position in space that, though not on the ground plane, was not far from it. The ground plane of the city represented the public, the social realm, and visibility in this realm, even while avoiding direct engagement, was essential to the upper classes. Manifested in typologies such as the *piano nobile*, the grand living spaces of apartments for the wealthy imposed themselves on the street environment just above eye-level, while poorer renters were obligated to climb stairs out of sight to upper-level apartments and the poorest were relegated to the attic.

Exceptions emphasized social exclusivity, such as the basement-level side entrances to the Paris Opera, for members only.

Modern consciousness (and high-speed elevators), in contrast, emphasized anonymity, autonomy, and abstraction in the urban realm. Being apart from the social milieu, high above ground in a penthouse office or apartment (or in a house hovering above ground on piloti) became desirable – looking out to clouds and sky, to a city abstracted below into a composed skyline swathed in flows of yellow cabs, with people too small to identify.

Social hierarchy in modern transportation was frankly ranked along the z-axis, with popular transit taking place below ground in subways, private cars moving along the city's surface, and airplanes flying elusively overhead.

From the 1970s onward, a new “groundedness” seems to have entered built environment consciousness, with the autonomy emphasized in modern cities transformed into an idea of supreme self-sufficiency. This quality is seen in a vast, underground futuristic utopia constructed outside Flagstaff, and the proliferation of a desire to live in an earth-berm house under a grass roof. In such schemes, “ground” is frequently less a signifier of the social than it is of a “nature” that exists with few people.