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Introduction to: From Above: The Practice of Verticality

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Abstract

Introduction to *Streetnotes* 26: From Above: The Practice of Verticality

“From Above: The Practice of Verticality” was born one nice summer afternoon in 2017, when we rollerbladed in Brooklyn’s Prospect Park together, deliberating what our next joint project could be. Our first one, “Public Space: Between Spectacle and Resistance” (*Streetnotes* 25) had come out the year before, in time for the 2016 Rio Olympics. We talked about the notion of seeing things, people, the world, possibly from above, and the contemporary urban experience. We share an interest in visual culture and thus in the all-encompassing representations (as well as eclipses) provided by panoramas, scale models (Blagovesta’s research since her PhD on the *Panorama of the City of New York*), and urban verticalization and horizontalization (Jorge’s research with Brazil’s 2014 FIFA World Cup and 2016 Olympics). The names of photographers Yann Arthus-Bertrand and Sebastião Salgado came up as cases in point, and, before we knew it, we had a CFP taking shape—something about panoramas, verticalization, photography, the contemporary visual experience, and the new matrix of virtuality: the selfie, social networks, going viral...does verticality help us escape from reality and solve problems magically, we wondered...

It took almost two years to get this project done—from the moment we first thought of it in Prospect Park, shared the idea with David Michalski, the chief editor of *Streetnotes*, composed and circulated the CFP, collected the submissions, read them multiple times and edited them, corresponded with the authors about the edits, edited them again, created the Table of Contents, wrote this introduction, and passed them on to David for the layout, and then proofed those files—quite a long journey. In the meantime, *The Panorama Handbook: Thoughts and Visions On and Around the Queens Museum’s Panorama of the City of New York* came out (edited by Hitomi Iwasaki and Blagovesta Momchedjikova Queens Museum 2018)—an encyclopedic collection of entries associated with panoramas; among them was one on “Verticality,” contributed by Jorge. And now we have 20 contributions to “From Above: The Practice of Verticality”—a project that is in fact all-encompassing as it tries to embrace horizontality, verticality, and virtuality.

Old or new, modern or post-modern, global or not quite so, cities are becoming increasingly vertical, and verticality may be regarded as a universal asset: the higher (the building, hill or mountain), the better (the view, for all purposes). From philosophers’ Jeremy Bentham’s and Michel Foucault’s “*panopticon*” to photographer’s Yann Arthus-Bertrand’s collection *Earth from Above*, the practice of vertical viewing has expanded from surveillance and control to forms of enjoyment and an aestheticization of the built and natural environments:

while a particular excitement has always been contained in the ability to see from above, a vertical tourist gaze has arisen globally.

The practice of verticality may be informed by what Sharon Zukin terms “architectures of power”: built or natural rooftops, panoramic viewpoints for visiting or living, cable car or helicopter sightseeing, etc. This volume is an attempt to critically engage with a possibly arising culture of verticality: the variety of contributions explore the experience and imagination attached to gaining a bird’s (or God’s) eye view, and offer an understanding of how and in what ways the production and/or consumption of verticality helps document the contemporary urban experience.

Verticality here is understood in multiple ways: inhabiting tall buildings; perceiving and staging height from the street; getting a bird’s eye view over an environment; mapping from an all-encompassing perspective...The empirical and the technological come to play with and against each other throughout the volume, as the contributions sway between admiring and fearing how technological developments have given us unprecedented access to verticality in terms of height, vision, surveillance, and therefore, power. The photographic camera has its own particular place in this discussion since it is central in documenting this glorious or perhaps uncanny access to the all-encompassing view. But then, there is also the paint brush, which tries to ground us back into our natural selves: via the observation with the unassisted human eye as well as plain old imagination.

The 20 contributions in this volume (personal, academic, and photographic essays; poetry; and drawings) are arranged in three sections: *From the Ground*; *Taking Off*; and *Landing, Somehow*.

From the Ground begins with the first of Jorge de La Barre’s 3-part piece “On the Contemporary Visual Experience.” In “Part I: Vir(tu)al Horizon(tal),” La Barre shows that we can no longer talk about the horizontal or vertical without talking about the virtual and thus, the viral. He gestures towards the selfie phenomenon: one that allows us to capture, paradoxically, both the landscape and ourselves in it: the zoomed out together with the zoomed in views, the horizontal together with the vertical. Giovanni Savino, whose photo essay, “Vertically Challenged,” follows, shows us that we can begin to control, even for the duration of a photograph, oppressive verticalities. Through a project where he wore his artistic tool, the photo camera, way below the hip, thus framing his human subjects in the forefront of the imposing gigantic architecture behind, he attempts to rewrite our experiences of being dominated by the city’s infrastructure on a daily basis, allowing us to appear, at times, even more imposing than the man-made structures. The relationship between architecture and our daily experience of it is further complicated by Gary W. McDonogh and Cindy Hing-Yuk Wong’s ethnography “The *Flaneur* Looks Up: Reading Chinatown Verticalities,” where the authors read verticality from the street, focusing on United States’ urban Chinatown neighborhoods with their signage and unique

staged second floors establishments. Here verticality means negotiation: between real and imagined, public and private, migrant and local. Urban verticality becomes a personal observation, sensitivity, and meditation in Blagovesta Momchedjikova's four New York City-centered poems in "Poetic Verticalities: Ice-skating, Nightstands by the Curb, Hair A-Z, The Highline." New York City remains the focus in Aaron Attoma-Matthews' essay "When the Horizontal Goes Vertical or How Skateboarding Redefines the Urban Environment," where the author argues that the horizontal movement of the skateboard changes radically when one tries to inscribe the sidewalk by performing a skateboarding trick—it becomes a vertical phenomenon that, somehow, changes something about the city, even if momentarily. LinDa Saphan and Kevin Cabrera, too, are concerned with that which transforms the city through its vertical presence: their "The Seasonal Christmas Tree Take-Over of New York City" offers a sociological study of the holiday makeover of the metropolis through the Christmas tree sellers (predominantly from neighboring Canada), who set up shop and home on the streets of New York City for a month, and how that affects pedestrian traffic, commerce, and the holiday spirit. Ethan Caldwell then in "Demarcating Fences: Power, Settler-Militarism, and the Carving of Urban Futenma," draws our attention to a temporary-turned-permanent edifice, and certainly not festive: the fence in Okinawa, around which Okinawans continue to try to reclaim a divided space; this vertical division becomes the separation, as the author claim, between military/American, and settler and civilian/non-American, indigenous.

The second section, *Taking Off*, begins with Denice Martone's intriguing photo camera searching for the best angle from which she can document New York's architecture. In "Seeing What is Up in Manhattan," she often finds herself a trespasser, who crosses boundaries, limits, and expectations, in order to be able to get the best aerial view. Toni Okujeni, in "The Busy African City: Down Below," continues that search; this time, however, he trusts not a camera but his own paint brush, observation, and imagination. As he depicts colorful sites: the market place, the bus station, the beach, and the people who occupy them, in various African cities, he shows us how the aerial view, the view from above, need not always belong to a technological invention, as long as one can have access to elevated points in the city: a bridge, a balcony, an overpass, and be willing to continue to both observe and imagine. In "Airplanes and Apprehension: Nature-Society Hybrids in Planetary Perspective," Justin Raycraft then takes us farther away, to the airplane, where he observes and photographs the city down below from the airplane window, reminding us that travel need not be about participating in a series of distractions (watching films, listening to music, eating) but about a state of increased awareness and observation, not trying to kill time but to revel in it. He is asking us to not forget what humanism means and how we can practice it, even when we view our surroundings from a plane flying 30,000 feet above ground, at a great speed—all a human achievement. Jorge de La Barre, in his "Part II: The Vertical Gaze," then, reminds us that we cannot think of verticality forgetting how the bird's eye view, achieved through any kind of technology, is always a sign of power: cities rely on

communicating their position in the global world through the amount and kind of high-rises they possess. Even on a smaller scale, “air rights” (in themselves, virtual rights) above existing buildings can be sold and bought these days, further emphasizing how verticality continues to get more and more desirable, and certainly more expensive. Tourism, of course, is largely responsible for marketing urban (and other) verticalities and collecting the profits from that marketing. João Luiz Vieira in “The Forest and the City: Rio as an Immersive Landscape,” explores the iconography of verticality through travelogues that employed the Cinerama technology and the bird’s eye view, to cast Brazil, and especially Rio de Janeiro, as an exotic destination. Similar was the case with New York’s iconic lost landscape featuring the Twin Towers, as Blagovesta Momchedjikova reminds us through a postcard project, “An Alphabet of Disaster: 9/11 from A to Z,” where the infamous skyscrapers continued to circulate on postcards long after they were gone from the city. The skyscraper, in particular, occupies a very special place in pop culture, as Tina Wasserman examines in “Utopian Verticality: The Skyscraper and the Superhero in the American Imagination”; indeed, it has been crucial in the development of the narratives of superheroes, which we know most prominently from movies.

In the third and final section, *Landing, Somehow*, we first encounter Brittney O’Neill and Debra Laefer’s fascinating study of LiDAR (Light Detection and Ranging) technology, “From God’s Eye to Ground Level: Aerial LiDAR as an Avenue to a Volumetric Understanding of Urban Spaces,” which focuses on the Spire of Dublin, a millennial public sculpture of controversial nature in the heart of the city, and the 3D information collected through this type of sensing (regarding not only verticality but also volume). Joseph Heathcott continues this spatial analysis in “Mexico City Morphologies,” by exploring Google Earth imagining. Heathcott argues that even though Google Earth images are—like previous attempts to view and represent space from above such as maps and aerial photographs—linked to power and surveillance, they also offer opportunities to study urban spatial forms otherwise invisible from the ground. These spatial forms are simultaneously complex and mundane, planned and spontaneous, all the while creating, challenging, documenting, or precluding urban movement, history, and memory. Scaling down our perspective, Nicole Callihan, in “Pantoum from the 44th Floor; True Story w/ Mourning Dove,” deliberates the view from the high floor she lives on, and the separation between those who are up above and those, down below. Our descent continues with Blagovesta Momchedjikova’s “Standing Walking Dancing Tall,” where we find ourselves on the city street again. Through an essay, a statue, a poem, and a souvenir, we find that verticality, when coupled with race, is no longer the synonym of power and privilege but of danger. From the city street, we then enter an apartment building in Shanghai, where Dada Docot invites us to spend time in the area we normally just pass through—the stair case. Docot, in “Urban “Clutter: Stairway Landings of Shanghai,” photographs and ponders the multiplicity of lives and experiences that have produced so much excess, piled not in the residents’ homes but instead in immediate proximity—outside the front door, in the stairway—proposing a new way of thinking of verticality:

as excess, accumulation, and, weirdly, both preservation and neglect. Finally, Jorge de La Barre, in his third part, “Oblique Strategies,” discusses the photographic works of Sebastião Salgado, known for his more human, horizontal approach, and Yann Arthus-Bertrand, known for his more distant, vertical approach. When the horizontal and vertical merge, suggest the author, something monumental happens—as in Terry Boddie’s work “Blueprint,” for example: the history of the African diaspora comes to life. Yet, there is perhaps another, still very powerful, dimension to consider: that of cyberspace, where horizontality and verticality become combined and interchangeable...

We hope that you will enjoy reading all the contributions in this volume; that you will rethink your own understanding of verticality; that you will consider the consequences of verticality—not only for your own self but also for the environments that you inhabit or pass through. Vertical perspectives can certainly offer unprecedented opportunities but they certainly can also entrap us. We hope that the contributions here will remind you that aspiring after the vertical is a primal desire, which the newest technologies are fulfilling so rapidly, so easily. Yet we cannot forget that in exchange for this fulfillment, we are perhaps giving up our human abilities to observe, to imagine, to dream.

We wish to thank our contributors to this volume: for their bold ideas, for their willingness to revise, for their generosity to share their work with us all, for their extreme patience with the long process of putting this volume together.

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Finally, we wish to thank each other, for navigating through our individual idiosyncratic passions with an open heart and an open mind, and certainly with a sense of humor: our collaboration makes us wish that all collaborations (be they vertical, horizontal, or virtual) were like this.

About the authors

Blagovesta Momchedjikova, PhD, is a lover and writer of cities. She teaches writing, art, and the urban experience at New York University; and chairs the Urban Culture Area for the Mid-Atlantic Popular/American Culture Association (MAPACA) and the Conference Scientific Committee for the International Panorama Council (IPC). She has edited *Captured by the City: Perspectives in Urban Culture Studies* (2013) and *Urban Feel* (2010); co-edited *From Above: The Practice of Verticality* (2019), *Thoughts and Visions On and Around the Queens Museum's Panorama of the City of New York* (2018), and *Public Place: Between Spectacle and Resistance* (2016); and contributed to *The International Panorama Council Journal*, *The Everyday of Memory*, *Robert Moses and the Modern City*, *Streetnotes*, *Iso Magazine*, *The Journal of American Culture*, *Tourist Studies*, *Genre: Imagined Cities*, and *PIERS*.

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