

11.329 Social Theory and the City

Session 3: Up vs. Down

The class discussed the theoretical positions presented in student responses to the second assignment. Student volunteers read aloud their responses, and the class was asked to react to the papers. Issues raised in the discussion are listed below.

Paper 1 - Lara Belkind:

- The paper gave the classic story of the evolution of the meaning of up and down as a power relationship
 - o At one time (pre 20th c.), being near the ground but not on it allowed for the dramatization of power
 - o Later (20th c.), removal from the ground plane and the visual dramatization became an expression of power
- This experience can be made sense of in terms of cones of vision
- Morphology plays a role in the relationship
- The role of technologies in getting up and how they influenced the change in the dynamic of power was discussed (e.g. the elevator, the airplane)
- Even in the 20th c. there is still a notion that being above is not simply an escape:
 - o Pan-optic control exists through vision.
- An alternate view of down (here presented as degraded space) can be found in Roman culture, where below was a significant symbolically orienting direction.
 - o This led to a discussion of the difference between the Greek and Roman concepts of the grid:
 - Greek: each place in the grid is equal in value to all other places;
 - Roman: certain places in a grid are of greater symbolic importance than others.

Paper 2 – Annis Whitlow:

- Her theoretical project explored the subject's perception of itself
 - o Up: self-magnification
 - o Ground: contingency
 - o Down: self-protection
- This is a procedure of how Simmel described the mental life of the metropolis.
- The underlying assumption is that humans have an interpretive dynamic, that they carry a measure of internal tools they apply to specific conditions
- Discussion of the revulsion of the "oversocialized" view of man (Dennis Wrong).
 - o Ian Hacking wrote *The Social Construction of What?*, which discusses the limits of social construction

- The issue the piece raises is: What are the limits of buildings in shaping the experience of someone else? How powerful is the built environment in shaping people?
 - o Has profound implications for the design profession
 - o Response 1: Negative Determinism: Design can prevent humans from hurting themselves but cannot actualize them
 - o Response 2: Objectivism: A designer must act on his/her own experience and not on the experience of others.