

**11.329 Social Theory and the City**  
**Exercise 2: Up and down and on the ground**  
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Aspects of verticality, and notions of hierarchy, are ubiquitous in the fields of urban planning and social theory. We speak of social strata, layers of society, advancing up the corporate ladder, a level playing field, a ranking in the basement, and the bottom lands or the flats. These concepts of place and society, and the metaphor of physical strata, occupy a prominent place in the vocabulary of social differences.

The topographic and built forms of the city are not on a single plane; the surface of the city is varied with hilltops and valleys and changes in elevation. Above and below and at grade, the city is constructed. Where built forms intersect, planners and architects discuss the separation or interaction of activities by grade.

We might begin by considering the ground plane itself. What soils and foundations provide for adequate support? What activity takes place at the level of the street? How does the city dweller traverse the vertical realm of the city over the course of the day? The ground plane is the domain where people and activities may come together, in the public realm- at the plaza, in the park, on the boardwalk, or on the street. To be on the same plane, is, in a sense, to be equal. Open places, with public access, allow for a diversity of people and social behavior. Civic life benefits from these on-the-ground places, the terrain of social interaction and the meeting of different classes and cultures: public space.

In going up or going down, traveling through the public and private and mixed realms of the city, one often encounters restrictions. Access is limited to the upper floors without an appointment. Identification must be shown. A ticket or badge is required. Of course, these restrictions can be present on the ground plane as well, but the physical restrictions of getting up or getting down enhance this experience and allow for monitoring at points of access.

From above, the view of the plaza and the street changes. The ground plane can be distorted by height, disrupted by the designer's temptation to remake the surface as an object to be viewed from upon high.

The top of the skyscraper is one of many places above. In the natural forms of the city, on the rock outcroppings and atop the hills, the high places offer views and cleaner air and protection from flooding, while the bottoms do not. These aspects of topography are translated into land values and through the workings of the market often reflect the wealth required to inhabit them.

Marginal land floods, it is leftover, it is occupied by unwanted uses or people who cannot find land or shelter elsewhere. In the process of residential selection, of finding a home, people are distributed across space and those with the fewest resources and the least opportunity often settle into the bottom lands.

Applying these notions to built form yields new perspectives on the city: how do the symbols of the built environment operate on us at the simpler, if perhaps unexamined level, of what is higher than what, who is above whom? The forms of the city are complex. A bunker below ground can provide security, while a tower in the sky can be vulnerable to fire or collapse. The public housing tower is tall without status, while the estate house may be low to the ground but high in status. The multi-varied forms of the city produce multiple contexts and multiple meanings.

Of these symbols, perhaps none is more present or blunt than the architectural expressions given to downtowns. The vertical city symbolizes power. Corporate towers mark the landscape, define the skyline, standing above other forms to be viewed from afar. In contrast, below ground is hidden from view and, perhaps, for this reason, we know of challenges to power and radical culture as underground.