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Guest editors' introduction: Towards a vertigology of contemporary cities

A B S T R A C T

In this introduction, the guest editors set out the contextual and theoretical rationale for the Special Issue: Vertigo in the City. It begins with some basic definitions and uses of the term vertigo, before tracing the relationship between vertigo and the environmental, emotional and representational landscape of the high-rise, high-density modern city. Drawn from a multidisciplinary collaboration which culminated in 2015, the six papers selected for the SI are then briefly described, highlighting contributions and intersections between the different papers. The introduction ends with a call for the development of an interdisciplinary approach to the study of vertigo, with a view to further opening up 'vertigology' research avenues in the future.

1. Introduction: towards a vertigology of contemporary cities

Vertigo is a complex and wide-ranging phenomenon, and a journal issue cannot claim to cover its full range of implications. Instead, this themed collection aims to chart some of the latest research that has been conducted in different disciplinary fields which, in their own ways, engage with the emotional states associated with vertigo and examine their spatial and social manifestations. Despite its pervasiveness in everyday language and in varied scientific discourses, vertigo is a notoriously ambiguous concept. In the biomedical sciences, the term denotes a sensation of spinning that is often treated as a symptom of balance system disorders. In common parlance, however, it is used far more broadly to describe feelings of giddiness, disorientation and loss of balance, both literal and metaphorical (Yardley, 1994). Consequently, vertigo is associated with a range of human emotions, oscillating between anxiety and pleasure, which inhabit both our embodied and our imagined worlds (Quinodoz, 1997).

This emotional spectrum is particularly manifest in modern cities, where people are exposed to intense sensory stimuli that affect their mental, emotional and physical lives in complex and often interconnected ways. This is nothing new per se. Indeed, the word vertigo has long been used to describe the maelstrom of the modern metropolis. Between the late-nineteenth and the early-twentieth centuries, the dizzy pace of life, work and construction in industrial cities became synonymous with the vortex of modernization (Killen, 2006). The emotional landscape associated with tall buildings, in particular, has a socio-cultural history that is rooted in the experience of the rising modern city in the late 1800s. Vertigo has been related to the experiential, but also existential, anxiety caused by the vertical growth of the metropolis, with its expansive spaces and frenetic pace. As Vidler (2000) has pointed out, the rise of the modern city brought about a series of 'spatial diseases' that were diagnosed as distinctly urban conditions, such as agoraphobia, claustrophobia, and acrophobia. Whilst the mental disturbances precipitated by various social and environmental conditions have been investigated within a historical perspective (Smart, 2000; Callard, 2006), comparatively less attention has been paid to the specific aversion to high places in the modern city. Yet acrophobia, commonly described as 'fear of falling', is a widespread phenomenon whose impact on the wellbeing of urban dwellers remains largely unrecognised by architects and planners.

Just as the notion of vertigo resists simple definitions, so too does its qualification as undesirable, something to be avoided. It is fascinating to observe how, as the urban landscape and pace of life became notably vertiginous at the end of the nineteenth century, new forms of commercial recreation emerged which promoted the association of vertigo with pleasure. The amusement park phenomenon, initiated at Coney Island, New York, at the turn of the twentieth century, spread rapidly across the US to Europe and beyond. By 1914, no major western city was without its own 'Luna Park' or 'White City', where city-dwellers could pay to experience a concentrated version of the urban spectacle: dizzying heights, speeding rides, repetitive mechanical noise, multi-coloured electric lights, and transient crowds (Kane, 2013).

By the early twentieth century, rollercoasters and other giant thrill rides offered unparalleled forms of motion: sharp turns and inclines, even 360-

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degree revolution. Like high-rise buildings, they seemed to defy the forces of gravity. Moreover, the ups and downs, sudden twists, and the exhilaration of a rollercoaster ride soon became a familiar metaphor for the disjunctive nature of life in the modern city. Film-makers such as Walter Ruttmann seized on the rollercoaster as a symbol of modernity itself. *Berlin, Symphony of a Great City* (1927) includes, for example, first-person shots from a rollercoaster to signal the thrill of ascent and the fear of falling which characterised emotional responses to the metropolis.

Thrill seeking was (and is) understood as a defining characteristic of the modern psyche. As Simmel famously observed in 1907, the indifference and isolation induced by living in big cities caused an inner restlessness which people sought to satisfy through intensified experience: 'the lack of something definite at the centre of the soul impels us to search for momentary satisfaction in ever-new stimulations, sensations and external activities' (Simmel, 1978: 257). The first amusement parks provided an escape from the anonymity of urban life. In doing so, they catered for a shared desire for sensuous and immediate engagement with life, a desire that continues to drive urban pleasure-seeking trends today. Even now, as engineered thrills are taken for granted and as the 'shock' of the modern city has been internalized, urbanites of all ages and backgrounds continue to be drawn to large-scale attractions combining height, speed and disorientation in new ways (Kane, 2015). The enduring popularity of the Ferris Wheel (Borden, 2014) is just one example of how the pursuit of dizziness, and of environments in which a purely emotional intensity might still be found, are a defining element of city life (Kane, 2013).

Vertigo is, then, inextricably bound up with the rising skylines of modern cities. In the vertical metropolis, the fear (and thrill) of falling from great heights coexists with the possibility of its physical occurrence, becoming a source of inspiration in the visual arts and other representational forms:

> One effect of the new skyscraper landscape was that falling became psycho-social reality, and vertigo, that dizzy preparation for the fall, was rehearsed in the wider cultural imagination, moving between potent metaphor and lived condition. […] Vertigo, as condition, sign and image, was a valve through which to mediate a darker malaise at the heart of modernity (James, 2013:91).

Today, as the rise of super-tall and mega-tall buildings finds new impetus as a globalised trend, vertigo may provide a useful category to address the combined effects of mobility, densification, and verticality that increasingly characterise the growth of cities around the world. A key aim of this Special Issue is therefore to investigate how research that tackles vertigo from different disciplinary angles may help us to interpret the changing perception, emotion and experience of space in the contemporary city. Whether we love it or loathe it, vertigo has become an integral part of urban life.

Furthermore, vertigo is not confined to the vertical. A wide range of environmental factors which define the modern city – including movement, speed and visual stimuli – can produce dizzying sensations. As a result, even familiar urban spaces, such as supermarket aisles and crowded or traffic-filled streets, can pose a serious challenge, especially for people affected by vestibular conditions.[1] Neuroscience research has begun to shed light on the social cost of vertigo and its impact on the quality of life and work of different urban populations (see, for instance Bronstein et al., 2010). And so, while the health and wellbeing of some urbanites are impaired by high-rise and high-density city life on one hand, we also witness the almost obsessive pursuit of vertigo-inducing urban experiences (such as 'skywalks', slides, and infinity pools) and thrill-seeking spatial practices inspired by extreme sports (such as free climbing and parkour) on the other. This paradox makes a cross-disciplinary appraisal of vertigo in the city, and of its socio-spatial manifestations, all the more relevant today.

Whilst this Special Issue aims to foster a dialogue between wide-ranging disciplines, it is worth noting that it draws its original impetus from research in architecture and design. Therefore, within the scope of this collection, the focus is primarily on issues of height and verticality in relation to city spaces. Several papers deal with the experience of tall buildings situated in urban environments, thereby contributing to the current debate around vertical urbanism. The broad context for this discussion is provided by a body of literature that has variously scrutinised the increasing relevance of the vertical dimension in the design and control of built environments, as well as their implications for the ways in which spaces are perceived and imagined. These range from early theorisations of the 'politics of verticality' (Weizman, 2002) to more recent arguments that foreground the vertical as a new paradigm of urban geography (Graham, 2016). Furthermore, the dizzying experience of vertical spaces has been linked with the sense of groundlessness that pervades the present moment, in which the metaphors of *free falling* as existential condition is leading to new forms of visuality and representation (Steyerl, 2011). At the same time, the emotional response to the experience of heights, which had previously received limited scholarly attention, has become the subject of research into the geography of phobias (Andrews, 2007), while the tension between *acrophobia* and *acrophilia* – the attraction to extreme heights – has also been studied with regard to film and cultural representations (LeBlanc, 2011).

Against this background, this collection explores the emotional and affective qualities of spatial experiences in relation to vertiginous sensations. Bodily encounters with vertical spaces provoke a broad spectrum of emotions, from fear and anxiety to excitement and pleasure. A similar range of reactions can be triggered by less obvious environmental conditions in the city: streets lined by tall buildings, wide open squares or plazas, and even relatively modest heights can induce dizziness for some. In very different ways, the contributions collected here address aspects of human feeling associated with vertigo: the feel *of* buildings, feelings *in* buildings, and feelings *about* buildings (Rose et al., 2010). By addressing some of these experiences, perceptions and feelings, we hope to raise questions about the agency of particular buildings and spatial environments in shaping the emotional landscapes of contemporary cities.

In so doing, the Special Issue draws on the growing body of literature that, in recent years, has foregrounded the role of emotions and affects in the social production of space. Phenomenology has provided a popular basis for a holistic appreciation of buildings that foregrounds sensory experiences and emotions (Holl et al., 2006), as well as inspiring geographies of architecture concerned with embodied practices and with the relational aspects of inhabitation (Kraftl and Adey, 2008). In addition, feminist scholars have proposed alternative accounts of architecture – in conjunction with film and visual arts – that combine cultural history with the emotional cartographies inscribed in personal experiences and autobiographies (Bruno, 2002). The sensory turn in the social sciences has instigated further debate around the role of senses in the experience of cities, as demonstrated by several exhibitions and publications (Zardini, 2005; Diaconu et al., 2011).[2] To this heterogenous body of work should be added the literature on experience-driven design, a field of research in its own right that explores the affective interactions with objects produced in disciplines ranging from animation to industrial design (McDonagh et al., 2004). None of these studies, however, has yet addressed the significance

[1] Vestibular disorders affect the balancing function of the inner ear and can result from both physiological and psychological factors. They are associated with a variety of medical conditions, such as Benign Paroxysmal Positional Vertigo (BPPV), Ménière's disease, and labyrinthitis.

[2] Relevant exhibitions include: 'Sense of the City' at CCA, Montréal, 2005–06; 'Architecture and its Affects', Venice Biennale, 2012; and 'Sensing Spaces: Emotional buildings' at the Royal Academy of Arts, London, 2014.