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Skywalking in the city: Glass platforms and the architecture of vertigo

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1. Introduction

Ever since the advent of high-rise architecture, in the late nineteenth century, the modern city has been a distinct locus of vertiginous experience. Whilst the correlation between vertigo and tall buildings might at first appear to be an obvious one, it is in fact a variable function of ever-evolving techniques and materials, as well as depending on the psychosocial conditions that underlie the experience of space at a given place and time. A great deal of public interest has been aroused over the past decade by the proliferation of glass-floored viewing platforms, which have become increasingly popular features of observation decks around the world. These platforms, often branded as 'dare to walk on air' experiences, are designed to challenge the user's perception of spatial depth. Whilst older types of viewing galleries, such as open decks with low walls, could provoke stronger feelings of height vertigo than new glass floors (not least because of the imagined agency of throwing oneself off the high point), the latter are distinct insofar as they are designed to conjure the thrill of walking over the abyss in a seeming state of suspension.

The rise of glass floors gathered momentum in the mid-noughties, at a time of rapid growth of vertical cities (King, 2004) that saw a new wave of 'supertall' and 'megatall' buildings emerge around the world. Social implications of contemporary high-rise construction have been investigated from various perspectives, with regard to the vertical dimension of cities (Graham and Hewitt, 2012; Graham, 2016); the role of the skyscraper in architectural culture (Nobel, 2015) and in tourism-led urban regeneration (Leiper and Park, 2010); and the psychological influence of tall buildings on their occupants (Gifford, 2007). Meanwhile, the vertical visualisation of space brought about by the combined use of satellite imagery and digital technologies, such as Google Earth (Di Palma, 2008), has affected the conditions of embodied seeing as well as the physical experience of vertigo, ushering in a new 'age of aerial vision' (Gilbert, 2010). The recent surge of thrill-seeking practices such as *rooftopping*, which has sparked a broad diffusion of 'vertigo inducing' images on the web, is further signal of a wider shift in urban experience and representation (Deriu, 2016). Seen together, these phenomena are symptomatic of a wider socio-cultural condition that appears to be pervaded by a dizzying spatiality, particularly acute in vertical cities.

The term vertigo crops up in architectural and urban discourse rather frequently, albeit mainly in a figurative sense. A case in point is the eponymous Glasgow exhibition (1999), where 'The Strange New World of the Contemporary City' was illustrated through an assortment of architectural projects that ranged widely in function and scale – from Tate Modern in London to the Ontario Mills shopping mall in California. In the exhibition volume, Tate Modern's architect Jacques Herzog remarked:

> 'The word "vertigo" does not have auspicious connotations. In fact, it would seem to address the sinister and even dangerous side of things: fear of heights and the attendant dizziness. Or even a double anxiety: the fear of falling passively through no fault of one's own, and the fear of responding quasi-actively to the magical attraction of the abyss and thereby succumbing to its vertiginous appeal. "Vertigo" could be said to express an inescapable ambivalence and indeterminacy.' (Herzog, 1999: 6)

The show did not have a specific agenda, nor did it claim to present a consistent design approach. Instead, the curatorial strategy aimed to capture the generic state of 'dizziness' and 'disquiet' provoked by the global architectural landscapes of the 1990s (Moore, 1999). The provocative, and somewhat prophetic, title echoed the spiralling tension that runs through Alfred Hitchcock's *Vertigo*: an enduring point of reference for cinematic representations of the city as a protean emotional landscape.

Two decades on, the 'strange new world' portrayed on the eve of the Millennium appears all too familiar. Indeed, the 'double anxiety' evoked by Herzog has meanwhile taken up a new dimension. Today, vertigo aptly describes the physical sensation that is induced by architectural elements such as the fashionable glass-floors that

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line many high-level walkways. This vogue is epitomised by the Shanghai World Financial Centre (SWFC), which was featured in the Glasgow exhibition when only the foundations had been laid. Its construction was eventually completed in 2008 following design alterations that increased the overall height of the tower to 492 m. The SWFC tower contains an exemplar of the current trend for immersive viewing experiences: besides panoramic vistas of the surrounding cityscape, the 100th-floor observation gallery, situated at 474 m of height, offers vertical views through a series of transparent glass panes built into the floor (see Fig. 1). The SWFC has since boasted 'the world's highest observatory', a record that may not last for long as the global race to the sky carries on unabated.

The construction of similar design features around the urbanised world suggests that architectural vertigo has become a sought-after phenomenon. This trend raises questions about the conditions in which space is designed, perceived and experienced in the contemporary city. What bodily experiences are implicated in the 'states of suspension' induced by these platforms? What are their material and spatial properties? And how do these spaces relate to the wider socio-economic context in which they are produced? A cross-disciplinary approach will inform the investigation of these issues, while a series of design projects will serve to illustrate various manifestations of the subject. The proposed interpretation draws on theories of transparency and sensory experience of space, supported by insights from psychology, and ultimately critiques high-level glass platforms as 'tourist bubbles' that crystallise, quite literally, a social imperative of the present moment.

2. Vertigo in the city: architecture and *ilinx*

The term vertigo is fraught with multiple and ambivalent meanings that cannot be exhausted in an article. Some elucidation may nonetheless inform a critique of current architectural trends. Whilst in medical discourse vertigo is usually treated as a symptom of balance system disorders, in popular culture the word is used more loosely to evoke various sensations of giddiness, dizziness, and disorientation that are associated with a perceived loss of equilibrium. Dictionary definitions range widely, from the illusion of physical movement ('the act of whirling round and round') to the bodily perception related to it ('swimming in the head'), and extend to figurative meanings ('a disordered state of mind, or of things, comparable to giddiness') (OED). In a figurative sense, the term has also been adopted to describe the precarious conditions of life in contemporary societies. For Young (2007: 12), 'Vertigo is the malaise of late modernity: a sense of insecurity of insubstantiality, and of uncertainty, a whiff of chaos and a fear of falling.' Accordingly, a generalised feeling of giddiness defines our 'liquid' modernity (Bauman, 2000), an epoch in which values that previously had a solid foundation, such as social status and economic position, have become increasingly fluid and unstable.

The notion of 'groundlessness' has gained currency in art, architectural, and urban discourses over the past decade (Dorrian, 2009; Steyerl, 2011; Graham, 2016). Dorrian (2009) in particular draws comparisons between the 'dissolution' of ground evoked by Hitchcock, as well as by authors like Nabokov and Sebald, and the disorienting experience induced by contemporary architectures such as London's City Hall. At the bottom level of this Foster-designed building, visitors can stand on a giant aerial photomap of London, taking symbolic possession of the city from a vantage point that traditionally signifies a position of power and control. Dorrian (2009: 86) sees this as 'an attempt to architecturally stage […] democratic transparency', in a similar mould as the glass dome of the new Reichstag in Berlin – designed by the same architect. At City Hall, the abstract miniaturization of London produced by the aerial view somehow jars with the act of walking on the photomap while looking down in search of familiar clues. If, on the one hand, this embodied experience provides the visitor with a sense of grounding, on the other hand the photomap triggers a 'vertiginous multiplicity' that causes an opposite 'ungrounding' effect: a disorientation amplified by the non-hierarchical code of representation that distinguishes satellite imagery from cartographic maps (Dorrian, 2009: 91).

The 'vertiginous ungrounding' described by Dorrian calls to mind philosophical conceptions of modernity as an existential

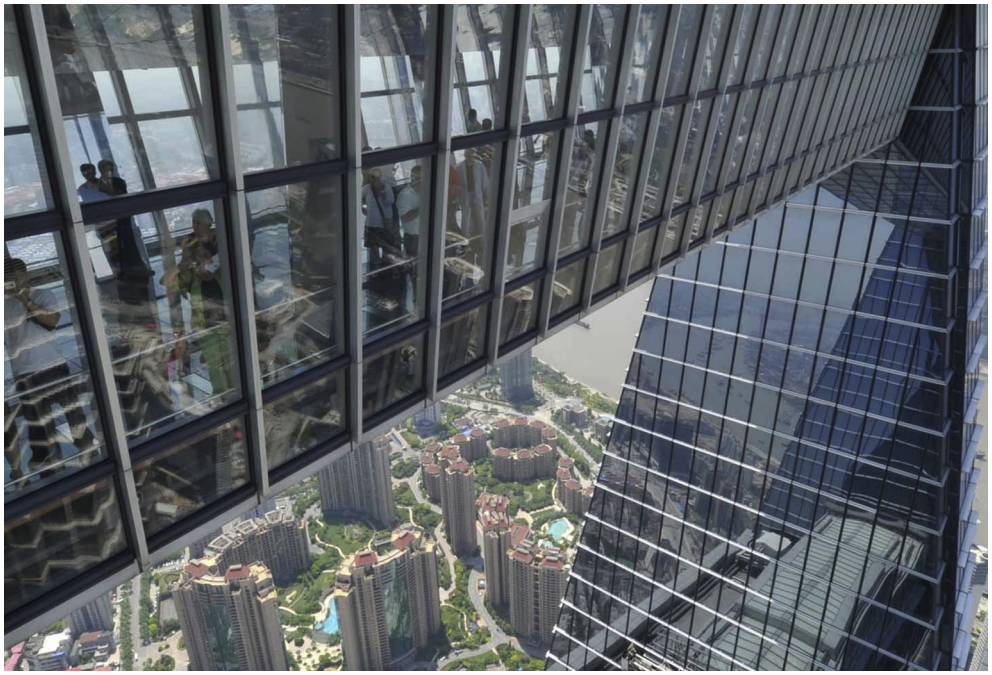

Fig. 1. Shanghai World Financial Centre. View of the 'Skywalk 100' observatory. Source: SWFC Observatory (http://swfc-shanghai.com/).

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