

**„Observation, Speculation, Spectacle: Visual Culture(s) at the
Observation Deck, 1968-2020.“**

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1. INTRODUCTION: SPECULATIVE ARCHITECTURE

1.1 VEGAS IN SHANGHAI

In 2016, during a trip to Shanghai, I visited an observation deck for the first time. Following the advice of the 2013 edition of the Lonely Planet tourist guide, which lists the observation deck at the neo-futuristic World Financial Center under the category of *Top Sights*, I ferried over to the Pudong New Area, located in the east of the city. Having been declared a special economic zone in 1990, the Pudong New Area is subject to a different economic policy framework than the rest of the country. As such, it provides an important “window” into China for investors and foreign capital. Only certain types of businesses are allowed to operate here, as Bin Xue Sang explains:

[p]ermissible enterprises need to produce, manufacture or construct energy and transportation facilities, urban infrastructure facilities, or products for export or advanced technology [...] Since 1990, Pudong has expanded the scope of these industries to include service businesses in finance, trade, real estate, tourism and others. (141)

A tourist attraction on top of a skyscraper that houses financial firms from around the world, the World Financial Center Observation deck is a direct expression of the economic framework that governs the Pudong New Area. The

futuristic flair that permeates this part of the city is equally present in the observation deck itself.

After purchasing our tickets, the group was corralled past an impressive miniature model of Shanghai whose LED sky simulated a complete day and night cycle as well as changing weather conditions. We were then moved into an equally impressive elevator whose interior looked like the inside of a spaceship, with white plastic paneling and a screen-ceiling which projected colorful loops as the elevator traveled upwards. The theme of architectural special effects continued in the observatory itself, where one could step onto glass surfaces that protruded over the edge of the façade, so that for a moment one experienced the unsettling sensation of floating hundreds of meters above the city. There were glowing light panels everywhere, electronic guideposts, and bands of Chinese signs scrolling on circular displays.



Fig. 1: Alan Levin: "Observation Deck of the Shanghai World Financial Center." September 20, 2008. Photograph. Wikimedia Commons. URL: https://de.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Datei:SWFC_Observation.jpg [Last Accessed April 30, 2020]

Although I had already paid for my ticket, the whole experience seemed like a continuous marketing pitch: the sweeping vistas of Pudong, separated from the "old," western part of Shanghai by the winding band of the Huangpu River; the many construction sites visible in all directions, the landmarks of the Oriental Pearl and Shanghai Tower; and the inevitable gift shops where one could buy miniaturized versions of the building one was presently standing in. It was as if the observatory was trying to sell me the city itself. In a way it did, or to be more precise: it sold me an impression of itself. The observatory

transformed the city into a spectacle, and sold this spectacle through the price of admission. It is from this observation that the following project unfolds.

This project argues that the appearance of commercial observation decks, places from which the city can be viewed from a vantage point, can be read as both the symptom and catalyst for fundamental changes in the discursive history of the city after World War II. Its prototype appears in the mid-1970s, on top of the World Trade Center, at a time when urban policymakers pivoted away from a philosophy of public spending and a relatively tightly knit social security system, and towards programs which aimed to transform cities into profitable enterprises and consumable spectacles. In the case of New York, the first step in this transformation saw the disappearance of the manufacturing and light industry sectors in favor of what has been called the FIRE industries: finance, insurance, and real estate. This project is concerned with a second transformation: the reorganization of the city under the paradigm of tourism. The observation deck is the preliminary endpoint of this transformation of city life into consumable spectacle; it is an architectural form both based upon and encouraging speculation, and promises to add value to wherever it is deployed. In this sense, it mediates the fusion between late finance capitalism and the touristic marketing of the city.

The basic conditions for this fusion, as I will show in chapter 3, were not only created by the changes in film culture that began in the 1960s. It also concerned a fundamental restructuring of the global economic system in 1971,

when the Nixon administration, first temporarily and then permanently, abandoned the gold standard under the agreement of Bretton Woods. The floating exchange rate paved the way for an economy of speculation, which in turn made the observation deck a plausible investment or, as Peter Mörtenböck and Helge Mooshammer have succinctly put it: “architecture’s engagement in capitalist economies has changed from speculation *with* spatial production to spatial production *for* speculation” (109).

One aspect of such an economy is that experiences of urban life are transformed into consumable spectacles. It is this transformation that takes place in the observation deck. Here, as I argue, a peculiar and highly curated para-experience of city life is manufactured and sold. To come to terms with the observation deck, I want to differentiate three particular visual paradigms: observation, speculation and spectacle. Whereas Jonathan Crary (1992) has posited the regime of observation as the governing force in shaping subjects throughout the 19th century, I argue that speculation has emerged as the contemporary regime.

I conclude the project by stating that the elevated view which the observation deck produces is inextricably linked to the notion of urban optimization—an idea of enhancement that is guided by changing dogmas, one of which being that the city should be a place where experiences are made available for consumption. The specific experience that the observation decks I discuss in this project provide, with their signature components of selective

admission, multi-media offerings, condensed urbanity, marble-clad elegance, and spectacular thrills, are thus not only inherently linked to the history of urban planning and its ongoing agenda of “city betterment.” They can also be regarded as templates along the lines of which a new image of the city is developing.

1.2 THE OBSERVATORY’S PLACE IN THE CURRENT MOMENT

In the second decade of the 21st century, observation decks are on the rise globally. Multiple large-scale projects that allow a high-altitude view of the surrounding area are currently underway in cities around the globe, in a veritable arms race of who can provide the highest and most spectacular observatory. At the same time, as competition increases, older observatories are being extensively retrofitted. As noted by some observers, developers “have realized that selling great views can be as profitable—and sometimes more profitable—than the offices, apartments or other space they sell on the floors below” (Grant). In New York, the observatories on top of the World Trade Center, Rockefeller Center and Empire State Building generated “about \$270 million in annual revenue before adding money made from food, beverage, and souvenirs” (Grant).

Seeking to emulate these successes, several stand-alone observation decks, where viewing platforms and other entertainment offerings are the

building's primary functions, are either in planning or are already being constructed. Examples include the Tulip in London, The Creek in Dubai, or the Infinity Tower near Incheon Airport in Seoul. The global popularity of the observation deck suggests that it is not a phenomenon limited to the United States. Rather, it is as a unique selling proposition produced by what Saskia Sassen calls "global cities."¹ In other words, it is a means by which cities can position themselves against competitors in a globalized struggle to attract business, talent and tourism.

In her article on the global city, Sassen points out that "[e]ach phase in the long history of the world economy raises specific questions about the particular conditions that make it possible" ("Global City" 27). The observation deck, which can be seen as the symptom of certain shifts in the global economic system raises a similar question: what are the conditions that make the popularity of this architecture not only possible but plausible? Hence, on the following pages, I will analyze some of the economic shifts that gave rise to these platforms.

¹ Despite the internationalization of economic processes, writes Sassen, the role of cities as hubs within networks of globalized trade is increasing rather than decreasing. Global cities, as Sassen calls them, are important nodes from which international capital streams are directed and coordinated. Cities with access to global trade circuits are, as she writes, what makes globalization possible in the first place, in "that they contain the resources that enable firms and markets to have global operations" ("Global City" 35). It is in those global cities "where a multiplicity of globalization processes assume concrete, localized forms" (40).

1.3 NEW FINANCE

On the Sunday evening of August 15, 1971, the popular TV-Drama *Bonanza* was canceled as president Richard Nixon sought to address the American people. In his speech, he informed the public of several economic policy changes that would later become known as the Nixon Shock. Other than tax-cuts and the freezing of wages and prices, the most radical policy change was the temporary suspension of the so-called Bretton Woods agreement. Ratified in 1944 at a conference held by the Allied powers in the spa town of Bretton Woods, New Hampshire, the agreement had governed the global monetary system for several decades. It guaranteed fixed exchange rates between national currencies and the US Dollar, whereas the value of the latter was secured by the United States gold reserves. As the reserves in Fort Knox at the time represented three-quarters of global gold supplies, no other country could back up its currency to the same extent as the United States. This made the dollar the inevitable choice for a global reserve currency (Amadeo). As long as the agreement was intact, every dollar bill could potentially be exchanged for $\frac{1}{35}$ of an ounce of gold. In that system, the denominal value of paper currency, a dollar, referred to the actual value of a finite resource, gold.

Facing a paradoxical economic condition known as stagflation, i.e. a period of economic recession that coincided with rapid inflation, as well as

having to deal with the mounting cost of the wars in Vietnam and Cambodia, Nixon tried to alleviate the situation via several legislative measures, such as intentionally devaluing the national currency. This however led to a panicky run on the gold reserves as people as well as foreign governments sought to preserve the value of their dollars by hastily exchanging them for gold (Amadeo). If the total depletion of the gold reserve was to be averted, the suspension of the gold standard was the only viable option.

The ramifications of this change in economic policy are disputed. From a sociological perspective, as Aaron Sahr argues citing Georg Simmel and others, the everyday *usage* of money remained unaltered even though its substance had changed (Sahr). That is, people used and desired money as much as they did before, regardless of whether it represented any sort of “real” value. If the gold standard was essential for money’s everyday usage, as Sahr points out, the end of the Bretton-Woods agreement would have meant the end of that usage. This, however, was not the case. If instead the essential aspect of money lies indeed in its liquidity, then the Nixon Shock was a relatively insignificant event. Whatever the case, reducing money to its function as a medium of exchange, as Sahr himself concedes, was shortsighted.

Following a more cultural-semiotic line of inquiry, the end of the Bretton-Woods agreement represents the end of a stable relationship between signifier and signified. As some scholars have argued, the abolition of the gold standard is equivalent to the abolition of any kind of stable frame of reference.

For Reinhold Martin, it represented not only the first step towards a deregulated economy but also reverberated on a fundamental socio-cultural level. In *Utopia's Ghost*, he notes that:

Though the gold standard itself had merely grounded currencies in yet another signifier (gold), the year 1973, when the delinking became permanent, has thus been seen by some as marking the emergence of a new phase in a global economy dominated by the speculative exchange of statistical risk, fully abstracted from the value of any underlying goods or services, in the form of new financial instruments such as derivatives. (94)

Jon Baldwin takes a similar stance in that he seeks to describe the global economy after 1971 by using concepts put forth by Jean Baudrillard. His focus is on how the transformation of the global economy into a “financial simulacrum” (Baldwin 2015) had implications that went far beyond the immediate economic context:

This ‘freeing’ of the market can be understood as a semiotic act, even a creative act, and is compared to radical movements in the arts. It is common to use the phrase gold standard to refer to a model of excellence or a foundation upon which judgment may be based. Postmodernity may be defined as an era that has lost such gold standard foundation. Nixon’s claim that ‘Gold is dead’ echoes Friedrich Nietzsche’s claim that ‘God is dead.’ Nothing is the same after this.” (Baldwin 2015)

Continuing in this vein, Baldwin draws a parallel between the abandonment of the gold standard and the eventual emergence of the architectural paradigm of postmodernism:

[a]round the date of the 'Nixon Shock', July 15, 1972 at 3.32 pm to be exact, Pruitt-Igoe, a large urban housing project in St. Louis, Missouri, was given the final coup de grace by dynamite and the first stage of demolition was complete. For architectural theorist and provocateur, Charles Jenks, this was the day modern architecture died and a new paradigm emerged: postmodern architecture. The destruction of the complex, typified by poverty, crime, and segregation, signaled the failure of public policy planning and is seen as a direct indictment of the ideals of modernism and of the society-changing aspirations of the *International School*. Modernist architectural form, planning, and space were meant to regulate good conduct and healthy behavior. Postmodern architecture, for better or worse, is incredulous to such ambitions and has lost the gold standard and regulation of modernist planning. (Baldwin 2015)

Baldwin re-iterates an argument put forth in Charles Jencks 1977 "Language of Post-Modern Architecture." In the book, Jencks describes the housing complex, which was designed by Minoru Yamasaki (who would go on to design the World Trade Center), as emblematic for the principles of progressive modernist architecture with its destruction heralding a departure from the ideas for which it stood (Jencks 1977:9).

In comparison, Frederic Jameson argues against such a reductive critique of architecture overly fixated on the "seam it shares with the economic" (*Cultural Turn* 163), and proposes to think of the relation between architectural aesthetics and economic circumstances as a series of mediations. Jameson begins by citing an argument by Robert Fitch. In *The Assassination of New York*, Fitch describes the deliberate and planned

dismantling of the small industries which had shaped New York's urban landscape (quarters like the garment or meatpacking district) in favor of jobs associated with industries such as finance, real estate and insurance (cf. Fitch:4). Fitch, as Jameson reads him, suggests that this shift towards a post-industrial economy was a conspiracy, instigated by a cabal whose constituents, however, with the exception of Robert Moses and Nelson Rockefeller, remain largely unnamed. What Fitch does not take into account, and here Jameson's own argument begins, is the "cultural icing" (Jameson, *Cultural Turn* 177), i.e. the aesthetic appearance of a building such as the Rockefeller Center and how it relates to the "cake" of the economic base. Jameson develops his analysis from the problem of land speculation, which, as he describes with reference to David Harvey, is defined by an underlying paradox:

[...] if land has a value, this [...] cannot be explained by any labour theory of value. Labour can add value in the form of improvements; but labour cannot possibly be imagined to be the source of land value as it is for the value of industrial production. But land has value nonetheless: how to explain this paradox? (184)

The explanation is again related to the abolition of the gold standard and the consequences that this had on the practice of financial speculation. As Jameson explains, the value of land is always defined in relation to assumptions about the future as "fictitious capital is oriented towards the

expectation of future value” (184). This expectation, for Jameson, is the answer to the paradox of land value and in turn provides the basis for his aesthetic analysis:

time and a new relationship to the future as a space of necessary expectation of revenue and capital accumulation—or, if you prefer, the structural reorganization of time itself into a kind of futures market—this is now the final link in the chain which leads from finance capital through land speculation to aesthetics and cultural production itself, or in other words, in our context, to architecture. (185)

Now, how does Jameson imagine an aesthetics that is based on a market increasingly oriented towards the financialization of the future? How does one get from “infrastructure” to “superstructure”? The two elements Jameson identifies are “extreme isometric space” and the “enclosed skin volumes” (186) produced by the glass curtain wall.

Isometric space, however much it derived from the modernist ‘free plan’, becomes the very element of delirious equivalence itself, in which not even the monetary medium remains, and not only the contents but also the frames are now freed to endless metamorphosis [...] The ‘enclosed skin volumes’ [...] illustrate another aspect of late capitalist abstraction, the way in which it dematerializes without signifying in any traditional way spirituality: ‘breaking down the apparent mass, density, weight of a fifty storey building’, as Jencks put it. (186)

Architecture, in Jameson’s reading, functions as a medium of the economy as its outward appearance reflects the logic of financialization. The architecture

of speculation, in this account, is as floating and spectral as the economic processes that sustain it.

Building on Frederic Jameson's idea of architecture based on the economic principle of speculation, I want to further differentiate my object of study. I suggest that calling the high-rise observation decks "observatories" is somewhat misleading as it over-emphasizes the principle of observation, which Jonathan Crary famously describes in his *Techniques of the Observer*. In chapter 2, I therefore want to propose three working definitions of three particular visual configurations. These configurations are observation, speculation and spectacle. Even though all three of these terms refer in some way to the act of looking, I will differentiate them so as to arrive at a set of guiding categories which can then be applied throughout the dissertation.

1.4 SURVEYING THE FIELD

Other than an example of architecture reflecting the logic of finance capitalism the observatory also presents a point of intersection where an emergent theory of urban design and architecture solely focused on the creation of experiences meets an emergent theory of film that concerns itself with spontaneously arising configurations of cinematic experiences. Its own constant amalgamation of film and built space frustrates any insistence on

medium specificity. At times, moving images and built space are blended so thoroughly that distinguishing between the two becomes an impossible task.

The observation deck helps us to understand the logic of an economy guided by the desire to transform the city into a “marketable experience” (Klingmann 89) whereas looking at how moving images are deployed in its design helps us understand its own immanent logic. As a unique configuration of built space and moving images and as an expression of a shift in urban design philosophies the observation deck demands to be investigated in detail. My approach in this case has been to combine approaches from the field of Visual Culture with that of architectural theory, tourism studies and postmodern theory.

Architectural theoretician Davide Deriu has produced one of the most distinctive accounts so far of the observation deck. In a 2018 article he looks at how observatories implement glass floors, walkable transparent surfaces that evoke a sensation between floating and falling, and how this can be seen as a symptom of the ongoing “vertiginization” of the city. As a consequence of cities becoming ever more vertical, Deriu states, the psycho-physical condition of vertigo becomes the primary mode of engagement with architecture. This vertiginous experience of the city manifests itself both in practices like rooftopping, where people, oftentimes illegally, climb on top of tall buildings, as well as in the increasing implementation of glass floors. Both rooftopping and glass floors are, for Deriu, expressions of a deeper philosophical shift that

takes place in the wake of modernity. Vertigo, in Deriu's understanding, can be regarded as the paradigmatic experience of an "epoch in which values that previously had a solid foundation, such as social status and economic position, have become increasingly fluid and unstable" (95).

The glass floors present in almost all observation decks can then be understood as the architectural expressions of this general condition of groundlessness. Developing Le Corbusier's idea of the "fifth façade," as a horizontal window that would be able to replace the flat roof, Deriu suggests that

by overturning the vertical window-wall onto a horizontal surface, the introduction of the glass floor has ushered in the sixth façade. This epithet befits the lower side of elevated buildings and overhanging building elements, insofar as they fulfil the condition of externality that is implied by the physiognomic etymology of the word 'façade': that is, in the case of glass platforms, the possibility of looking through from without as well as from within. (100)

Throughout my project I expand on some of Deriu's arguments. Nevertheless, my account of the observation deck differs from his in two important aspects. On the one hand, I want to read the observation deck on its own terms. As useful as Deriu's observations are, his article does not take into account the observation deck's specific history—a history that, as I argue, leads back to New York City's socio-economic situation in the 1970s. It is there that the

contemporary architectural configuration of the observation deck became plausible for the first time, and where many of the decisions that would guide all later iterations are made. Consulting archival material produced by the designers of the Top of the World, I argue that vertigo was not the dominant emotion the observation deck sought to evoke. Instead, it was guided by a desire to make the city appear comprehensible both to its visitors and its inhabitants.

On the other hand, I focus on an aspect almost entirely absent in Deriu's article, which is the fundamental role that moving images play with regards to the underlying logic of the observatory. While Deriu is primarily interested in the *kinesthetic* sensations that the observation deck produces within its visitors, I want to also investigate how it incorporates the *cinematic*. What I argue is that within the observation deck both concepts, the kinesthetic and the cinematic, tend to collapse into each other, producing an aesthetic experience that oscillates between the educational ambitions of the museum and the thrill-inducing nature of the fairground.

The connection between film and the city has been formulated and re-formulated many times. Eisenstein famously deployed the metaphor of the "path" to speculate on the similarities that exist between the experience of architecture and the experience of film:

the word path is not used by chance [...] Nowadays it may [...] be the path followed by the mind across a multiplicity of phenomena, far apart in time

and space, gathered in a certain sequence into a single meaningful concept; and these diverse impressions pass in front of an immobile spectator. In the past, however, the opposite was the case: the spectator moved between [a series of] carefully disposed phenomena that he absorbed sequentially with his visual sense. (Eisenstein 111)

Film has often been described as the only medium that is ontologically suited to adequately depict the constant movements of the modern metropolis. Many publications and thinkers have commented on this “scopic affinity between medium and place” (Koeck & Roberts 8). Indeed, the assertion that “film, arguably better than any other medium, seemed able to engage with the city’s physical disposition—its simultaneity, temporality and ephemerality” (8) is somewhat of a film studies axiom. Siegfried Kracauer, for example, saw film as “animated by a desire to picture transient material life, life at its most ephemeral. Street crowds, involuntary gestures, and other fleeting impressions are its very meat” (xlix). In 1984, Paul Virilio laconically noted that “the screen [...] became the city square” (Virilio 447), a notion that is taken up some years later by Giuliana Bruno when she writes that being the “product of the era of the metropolis and its transits, film expressed an urban viewpoint from its very inception” (*Atlas of Emotion* 18). For Bruno, “the machine of modernity that fabricated the city is also the ‘fabric’ of film” (21).

Monographs like Laura Frahm’s *Jenseits des Raums* are built around and gather similar observations. Film, as Lorenz Engell writes in the preface, attributes its own characteristics to the metropolis. As such the modern city

can be regarded as the product of gazes and experiences that are inherently connected to film. Film, for Engell, is what makes the city truly “accessible” in the first place (10). What these sources suggest is that the relation between film and the city goes beyond mere representation. Rather, film and the metropolis constitute each other, both emerging, as Bruno writes, from the machine of modernity. However, the moving images one gets to see when visiting observatories exist decisively outside the category of theatrical feature-length films and the corresponding modes of spectatorship that Kracauer, Frahm, Bruno and Engell most likely think of when formulating the links between cinema and the city. Within the observatory, focused, single-minded viewing is the exception, while en-passant, on-the-go watching of cinematic content is the norm.

Somewhat recently, film studies has seen a renewed focus on *experience*, as becomes apparent in works such as Francesco Casetti’s *Lumiere Galaxy*. Here, in a rejection of the focus on technological infrastructure and material basis (a stance he primarily associates with the works of Friedrich Kittler and Marshall McLuhan), Casetti de-emphasizes the technologies that support cinema while pointing out the centrality of the filmic experience itself. “Granting a central position to experience,” Casetti writes,

[...] means overturning this [essentialist] perspective: What constitutes the defining core of a medium is the way that it activates our sense, our reflexivity, and our practices [...] what identifies a medium is first and

foremost a mode of seeing, feeling, reflecting, and reacting, no longer necessarily tied to a single ‘machine.’ (5)

Following this line of argument to its conclusion, Casetti encourages scholars to take a non-essentialist approach to cinema, regarding it “not simply as a specific kind of ‘machine,’ but as a particular way of seeing the world and making the world visible through images in movement” (8). De-emphasizing the role that cinema’s technical and material components such as the projection, the screen, and the auditorium play in the production of the filmic experience, Casetti calls for renewed focus not so much on what the cinema *is* but rather on what it *does*:

The specificity of a medium, *qua* support or device, therefore lies in its ability to move experiences freely. If necessary, a medium may also lift experiences from another medium—as does the gramophone, when it borrows a sound from a musical instrument. This means that an expressive field (a medium, this time *qua* a cultural form) can find other instruments (other media) in order to venture beyond its own borders. The medium that intervenes does not represent a betrayal, but rather an opportunity: it gives the previous media the chance to survive elsewhere. (27)

Casetti is by far not the only one who has observed this shift in the localization of moving images. In *Ambient Television*, Anna McCarthy concerns herself with an object that, as it blends into the backgrounds of hardware stores, retail stores or doctor’s offices, equally blurs disciplinary boundaries (McCarthy 195). Pepita Hesselberth and Maria Poulaki suggest the term “compact

cinematics” to conceptualize the moving image in terms of “what it *is* as much as to what it *does*—as material form, praxis, and encounter; as an activity” (Hesselberth & Poulaki). Haidee Wasson and Charles Acland suggest ways of dealing with various forms and formats of useful cinema in an effort to come to terms with the fact that “[...] cameras, films, and projectors have been taken up and deployed variously—beyond questions of art and entertainment—in order to satisfy organizational demands and objectives, that is, *to do something* in particular” (3).

The observation that the essence of cinema as a medium lies precisely in it not having a discernable essence but in an ability to appear in a variety of contexts, also appears in a recent conversation between Miriam DeRosa and Vinzenz Hediger. Reflecting on the state of film studies, they both come to the conclusion that film studies’ formative triad of canon (i.e. a catalog of “important” works), index (i.e. the idea that photographic media sustain a privileged access to reality) and apparatus (i.e. both the architecture of the cinema itself [dark room, projected light] and the social framework that exists around it) is no longer sustainable.

The transition to digital photography in the 1990s threw the index in crisis, the development of digital networks and platforms ended the privilege of the dispositif of cinema over other modes of circulation, and new modes of digital access and the discovery of new fields of research such as ephemeral and orphan films subverted the canon. (De Rosa & Hediger 14)

With the traditional categories lost, De Rosa and Hediger see a disciplinary fork in the road. Either one resorts to melancholically mourning the lost primacy of the aforementioned triad or, as Hediger suggests, one focuses on analyzing specific aspects of various “configurations of the moving image” (18). One approach in this regard, and the one which take in this project, is to recognize that “moving images are part of a wider visual culture and that its components are dynamic forms—configurations, as we are claiming—continuously influencing each other” (18). In the context of my project, this means subsuming moving images into the broader categories of observation, speculation and spectacle that I outline in chapter 2.

1.5 UNSTABLE METHODOLOGIES

The observation deck presents a fluid constellation of built space and moving images that inherently resists methodological classification. Some traditional methods like textual analysis still apply; however, at points their reach appears to be limited. One of the biggest challenges of this project was therefore to develop a consistent method catered towards an object that constantly eludes disciplinary boundaries. Approaching the observation deck strictly from a film and media studies perspective does not do its inherent complexity justice. Isolating the kinds of moving images visitors get to see and analyzing them in terms of narrative structure, aesthetic devices, and how they make use of the

elements of montage, sound, camera, mise-en-scene etc., as we might do for a film by, say, Truffaut, would mean applying a framework that makes little sense. Another problem is that the moving images within the observatory lack most of the elements usually associated with feature films. There are no characters (if one does not count the city itself as a character), stories or plot points. To analyze them only in aesthetic terms would also completely disregard the fact that these images serve a very pragmatic function within the observatory. As audiovisual pacemakers they regulate the influx of visitors by incentivizing them either to stop and look or to move on to the next attraction.

It is also oftentimes hard to distinguish architectural elements from installations used to project images. In the case of the SkyPod elevator that transports visitors to One World Observatory on top of the One World Trade Center, moving images are fused into the infrastructure of the building itself. There are screens that pose as walls, displays disguised as windows, and curtains that mask projection screens. This begs the question of whether one is to regard these constellations primarily as architectural elements, as configurations of cinematic space or as something else entirely.

In a way, I was dealing with a similar situation to that which John Law and Vicky Singleton faced when conducting their study on the management of alcoholic liver disease (“Object Lessons”). They set out to describe the trajectory of a “typical” patient of alcoholic liver disease through the healthcare system in order to determine how that system might be improved.

However, their task was much more complicated than they initially assumed. Alcoholic liver disease as an object of study depends upon the way it is viewed: a social problem, a medical diagnosis (that itself depends on the specializations and instruments used), a managerial or administrative challenge, a histological finding or a biochemical process. The challenge in their case was to find a term that could fit the elusive and relational nature of the disease. Reviewing a number of approaches and fields like Actor Network Theory and Social and Technology Studies, Law and Singleton eventually settled on the somewhat enigmatic notion of “fire object.” This was a term that could fit the fluid nature of alcoholic liver disease and take into account the many “absence presences” that act upon it:

So we have three fire objects, three versions of alcoholic liver disease. Each is made in a series of absences, but (and this is crucial) each is made *differently*. In the hospital, it is a lethal condition that implies abstinence. In the substance abuse centre, it is a problem that implies regulation and control. In the GP’s surgery, it is a reality that is better than hard drugs. Each includes and relates to a different set of absent presences. Each is transformative and generative. (346)

The observation deck is an object, that, like alcoholic liver disease, cannot be “narrated smoothly from a single location” (348) but is instead acted upon by its own set of “absent presences.” Among these are the forces that govern the real estate market, the economic superstructure engendered by Nixon’s abolishment of the gold standard, the formal and aesthetic principles of the

moving image, and the emergence of the experience economy at the end of the 20th century.

Another important methodological guidepost was Hubert Damisch's essay on La Tourette, the Corbusier-designed Dominican monastery near Lyon, and the notion of the "theoretical object" derived from it. For Damisch, La Tourette functions as a model, a paradigm, and "an object that gives pause for thought and opens the way to reflection, but also as an object that, when examined more closely, itself secretes theory or at least directs it, feeds it, informs it—in other words, secretly programs it" (Damisch 298f.). In a conversation with Rosalind Krauss and Yve-Alain Bois, Damisch described the theoretical object as something that

obliges you to do theory but also furnishes you with the means of doing it. Thus, if you agree to accept it on theoretical terms, it will produce effects around itself [...] it's a theoretical object because it forces us to ask ourselves what theory is. It is posed in theoretical terms; it produces theory; and it necessitates a reflection on theory. (qtd. in Bois 8)

For Damisch, La Tourette is therefore not only the expression of a certain style or an architectural program, but an object which itself supplies him with the theoretical means to describe it. However, simply retracing its history and/or situating it within Le Corbusier's thought and/or describing how its shapes respond to the monastic rules of the Dominican order or the features of the surrounding landscape as Damisch does is not enough. Instead, as Damisch

suggests, one needs to take Le Corbusier's idea of the *promenade architecturale* seriously; that is, one needs to put into practice the theory that the building itself puts forth:

From the stairs of the residential floors to the inclined ramps of the conduits, another kind of experience imposes itself that we might describe as kinesthetic [...] Traveling through the place is not reduced to a promenade across an essentially visual space but occurs through the experience of walking. (Damisch 343f.)

With reference to Husserl, Damisch argues for a phenomenological approach to architecture—an approach based on walking. It is this approach, called *kinesthetic* by Damisch, which I make use of when engaging with the observation decks. A compound of the Greek words for moving (*kinein*) and sensation/perception (*aisthesis*), *kinesthetics* describes learning through movement. In line with Damisch's argument about La Tourette, it seems to me that the observation deck, in its constant evocation of physical sensations (vertigo, proprioception, floating and falling) encourages us to approach it kinesthetically. Hence, a large part of my research process has consisted in traveling to the places I write about whenever it was possible to do so. As The Tulip was never realized and with Top of the World already destroyed, my field trips have been limited to the One World Trade Center in New York and the U.S. Bank Tower in Los Angeles. Drawing on my visits there, I have described

my experiences in as much detail as possible and reached my conclusions from those experiences.

1.6 CHAPTER BREAKDOWN

This dissertation's central "theoretical objects" are four observation decks:

- (1) The Tulip in London, a project that is interesting in its failure and which I use to illustrate the logic of the experience economy.
- (2) The Top of the World observation deck that existed from 1974 to 2001 on the 107th floor of the South Tower of the World Trade Center;
- (3) The One World Observatory at the One World Trade Center, which opened in 2015.
- (4) Skyspace Los Angeles at the top of the U.S. Bank Tower, which reopened in 2016 after receiving a total makeover by the Singaporean investment fund that bought it a few years prior.

Chapter 2 is a continuation of the introduction, as it introduces three essential terms for this project: observation, spectacle and speculation. Furthermore, Martin Jay's concept of the "scopic regime" will serve as an umbrella term. Throughout the chapter I differentiate these terms and work out the various scopic configurations that they imply. I argue that within the observation deck all three of those "scopic regimes" are at play. Once I have outlined the terms, I apply them to a series of canonical accounts of elevated subjects. Spanning

more than 650 years, these accounts cover Petrarch's climb of Mont Ventoux, Goethe's trip to the Harz Mountain, Barthes' speculations on top of the Eiffel Tower and concludes with de Certeau's classic account on top of the World Trade Center. Here the focus is on how elevated views function as seemingly predisposed loci of theory. Lastly, by turning toward Outlook Tower, a curious building devised by evolutionary biologist and self-proclaimed polymath Patrick Geddes toward the end of the 19th century, I investigate how the elevated view became associated with the notion of "city betterment," and how it put into play the idea of urban planning.

Chapter 3 continues to develop some of the themes of the introduction, and looks at the way architecture both responds to and furthers economic developments. Namely, I investigate how the emergence of the so-called experience economy has begun to influence urban planning, and how the observation deck offers itself as a logical element in a city devised for touristic consumption. The theoretical object in this case is The Tulip, a stand-alone observation deck proposed by foster + partners. It is a project that provoked a strong and, as I will demonstrate, fairly typical critical reaction.

In chapter 4, I conduct an archeology of the observatory. My case study here is the Top of the World Observatory, which existed from 1974 to 2001 on the 70th floor of the North Tower of the World Trade Center. Conceived for the most part by architect Warren Platner and graphic designer Milton Glaser, Top of the World is a prototype. By working with archival material from the Warren

Platner Records, I trace how Platner and Glaser conceptualized this place and how it offered itself as a response to the crisis New York was experiencing at the beginning of the 1970s. I argue that by depicting the complexity of the city as problem in need of a solution, Top of the World marks a watershed moment in the history of urban planning in the United States. I also show that Top of the World presented a fusion of several conceptual frameworks. On the one hand I look at the way in which architectural, curatorial and design practices change in the late 1960s, and on the other hand I describe the changes in film culture that happen at roughly the same time.

That being said, Top of the World is also an early example of an emerging experience economy. It was initially imagined as a structure that was to provide the intensity of the New York urban experience, as visitors walked through a miniaturized copy of the city. And it implemented many of the practices that are now commonplace in today's experiential design, not least moving images and other audiovisual media. Faced with a city that was undergoing massive economic depression and witnessed an exodus of its population, it offered a different model of urbanity, one that adhered much more closely to the logics of tourism. By critically examining the wide range of documents (letters, press releases, interviews, photographs) contained in the archive will lay out an account of how within Top of the World, New York City appears not so much as an actual city is considered more like an underlying theme. The correspondence between Warren Platner and Milton Glaser is of

particular interest in this regard, as from it one can reconstruct how they arrive at their idea of what an observation deck should look like and what its larger purpose could be. Even though in its final form Top of the World was scaled back due to continuous budget cuts, it provided a conceptual prototype for the many structures that have since then succeeded it.

The fifth chapter deals with such a hyperreal descendant. The focus remains on New York, as I investigate how One World Observatory, housed on the 102nd floor of One World Trade Center—or Freedom Tower as it was called at some point during its development cycle—builds on its architectural heritage while adopting a range of new features; among them, various configurations of audiovisual media schizophrenically reconcile the irrepresentability of the attack with a desire to see forever. Here, the paradoxical ambitions of the observation deck come to the fore. This chapter also shows how tropes from the city film of the beginning of the 20th survive within the observatory, marking the kind of amalgamation of architecture and cinema I have outlined above.

In the sixth chapter, I focus on the recent refurbishment of the U.S. Bank Tower in downtown Los Angeles. After a Singaporean investment fund bought the Tower, it received an extensive overhaul that included the construction of a brand-new observatory called Skyspace LA. By juxtaposing two architectural elements, the staircase and the slide, I trace the perceptual shift that results from this renovation. Conceived as a journey towards visibility, Skyspace LA culminates in a second-long ride within a glass slide that

is attached to the building's exterior. Such architecture, I argue, responds to "a long-standing cultural contradiction in American society between the middle-class desire for experience and their parallel reluctance to take risks" (Hannigan 7). In the process, it coincidentally ends up promoting a new kind of perceptual engagement with the city.

2. SCOPIC REGIMES

Throughout this dissertation I refer to "scopic regimes," a term originally coined by Christian Metz and brought into wider discourse by Martin Jay. As my project is in many ways rooted in the assumptions that this term carries, I want to make clear how I understand and intend to use it. Proceeding from Jay's term, I will identify the three "scopic regimes" that serve as my key conceptual tools throughout the project: observation, spectacle and speculation.

"Scopic Regimes of Modernity" was first published as part of an anthology titled *Vision and Visuality*. Edited by Hal Foster, the collection gathered a number of symposium presentations that took place in the spring of 1988 at Dia art foundation in New York. As can be learned from the preface, the title of the symposium was meant to highlight the conceptual differences between the terms vision and visuality:

Although vision suggests sight as a physical operation, and visuality sight as a social fact, the two are not opposed as nature to culture: vision is

social and historical too, and visibility involves the body and the psyche. Yet neither are they identical: here, the difference between the terms signals a difference within the visual—between the mechanism of sight and its historical techniques, between the datum of vision and its discursive determinations—a difference, many differences, among how we see, how we are able, allowed, or made to see, and how we see this seeing or the unseen therein. (Foster ix)

Foster then uses the term regime himself in order to describe the totality of historical circumstances, techniques and “discursive determinations” and so on and so forth.² In this case, “scopic regimes” serve as a kind of conceptual shorthand to describe a conglomerate of social, discursive and technological factors that govern the circumstances under which one does or does not see. However, to avoid the degradation of the term into an overly broad catchall, I want to take a closer look at how Jay arrives at this term and how in his 2017 essay *Scopic Regimes Revisited* he evaluates the trajectory it has taken since 1988.

Jay begins his text with the observation that, allegedly, the modern era has placed a particularly strong emphasis on vision and that this emphasis differentiates it from earlier times:

Beginning with the Renaissance and the scientific revolution, modernity has been normally considered resolutely ocularcentric. The invention of printing, according to the familiar argument of McLuhan and Ong,

² For example, in the next sentence Foster writes that “[w]ith its own rhetoric and representations, each scopic regime seeks to close out these differences: to make of its many social visualities one essential vision, or to order them in a natural history of sight” (Foster ix).

reinforced the privileging of the visual abetted by such inventions as the telescope and the microscope. (“Scopic Regimes of Modernity” 3)

Ocularcentrism and the optical metaphors that derive from it, or so Jay argues, have guided some of the most influential thinkers on Western modernity such as Richard Rorty, Michel Foucault, and Guy Debord (3). Jay then sees his own text as an attempt to re-examine this prominence of the visual, and it is here that he brings the idea of “scopic regimes” into play. The term originates in Christian Metz’s *Psychoanalysis and Cinema*, where Metz uses it to distinguish the cinema from other forms of visual art and emphasize its uniqueness. For him, the theatre represents one sort of scopic regime whereas cinema represents another—a difference that, for example, consists in the presence (theater) or absence (cinema) of the objects or people seen (61f.).

Jay then employs the term to question whether or not one can speak of a single “unified ‘scopic regime’ of the modern” or whether there are in fact “several, perhaps competing ones” (“Scopic Regimes of Modernity” 3). The scopic regime that is presumed to function the most hegemonically and is often cited as “the modern scopic regime per se” (4) is usually, as Jay explains, the combination of “Renaissance notions of perspective in the visual arts and Cartesian ideas of subjective rationality in philosophy” (4). This regime, he writes, is oftentimes naturalized and taken as a kind of standard adhering as it does most coherently to an “experience of sight valorized by the scientific worldview” (5). “Cartesian Perspectivalism,” as Jay calls it, is often

regarded as *the* dominant visual tradition. It derives partly from a “late medieval fascination with the metaphysical implications of light” (5) and was cast into optical technologies such as the *velo*. This device, mentioned in Leon Battista Alberti’s *De Pittura*, consists of threads of rope intersecting in right angles, resulting in a grid that can then be used by painters to put three-dimensional subjects into two-dimensional perspective. Another important characteristic of Cartesian Perspectivalism is the configuration of what Jay calls the “viewing eye”:

Significantly, that eye was singular, rather than the two eyes of normal binocular vision. It was conceived in the manner of a lone eye looking through a peephole at the scene in front of it. Such an eye was, moreover, understood to be static, unblinking, and fixated, rather than dynamic, moving with what later scientists would call ‘saccadic’ jumps from one focal point to another [...] it followed the logic of the Gaze rather than the Glance, thus producing a visual take that was eternalized, reduced to one ‘point of view,’ and disembodied. (7)

Existing within a thoroughly “geometricalized space” which is expressed in the *velo*-grid of Alberti, the eye of Cartesian Perspectivalism was conceived as a radically disincarnated, quasi-abstract, universal entity (8). Constructing a highly abbreviated history of Western Art, Jay describes this as the dominant regime until paintings like Manet’s *Déjeuner sur l’herbe* (1862/1863) or *Olympia* (1863) re-introduced different relations between the painted subject and the gaze of the painter/viewer.

Another key aspect Jay attributes to Cartesian Perspectivalism was its disdain for storytelling, which came from an insistence on the autonomy of the image itself and its objective capability of representing the exterior world:

[...] the diminution of the discursive function of painting, its telling a story to the unlettered masses, in favor of its figural function, meant the increasing autonomy of the image from any extrinsic purpose, religious or otherwise [...] Cartesian perspectivalism was thus in league with a scientific world view that no longer hermeneutically read the world as a divine text, but rather saw it as situated in a mathematically regular spatio-temporal order filled with natural objects that could only be observed from without by the dispassionate eye of the neutral researcher.

(9)

For Jay, however, there are plenty of exceptions to this presumably dominant visual order, and he dedicates the rest of his article to challenging some of the underlying assumptions of this scopic regime. Paraphrasing Svetlana Alpers work on seventeenth century Dutch painting art, Jay posits that

[i]f there is a philosophical correlate to Northern art, it is not Cartesianism with its faith in a geometricalized, rationalized, essentially intellectual concept of space but rather the more empirical visual experience of observationally oriented Baconian empiricism [...] The nonmathematical impulse of this tradition accords well with the indifference to hierarchy, proportion and analogical resemblances characteristic of Cartesian perspectivalism. Instead it casts its attentive eye on the fragmentary, detailed and richly articulated surface of a world it is content to describe rather than explain (13).

Continuing his argument, Jay contends that the conventions of Baroque painting provide an even stronger challenge to the seemingly hegemonic regime of Cartesian Perspectivalism. Drawing from Christine Buci-Glucksmann, he describes baroque art as being fascinated with “opacity, unreadability, and the indecipherability of the reality it depicts” (17). In its predilection for the bizarre, the peculiar, and the oddly shaped, which finds expression in the usage of concave and convex lenses as well as anamorphic mirrors,³ baroque painting questions both Cartesian and Baconian epistemologies. Instead, as Jay suggests, it corresponds more closely to “Leibniz’s pluralism of monadic viewpoints, Pascal’s meditations on paradox, and the Counter Reformation mystics’ submission to vertiginous experiences of rapture” (17). Jay concludes his text with a plea to acknowledge the “plurality of scopic regimes” (20) and to resist the tendency to place one over the other.

2.1 SCOPIC REGIMES REVISITED

In 2017, almost thirty years after the publication of his first essay, Jay re-examined the validity of the concept and reflected on the trajectory it has taken. Commenting on the fact that “scopic regime” seems to have entered popular discourse while its concrete meaning “is by no means yet settled”

³ One famous example of such a play with perspective and optical distortion is Parmigianino’s *Self-portrait in a Convex Mirror* (ca. 1524).

("Scopic Regimes Revisited" 102) he goes into some detail on how he arrived at the concept. Initially, Jay writes, the essay was meant to explore and emphasize the visual metaphors present in Martin Heidegger's 1938 lecture *Die Zeit des Weltbildes*. Here, Heidegger states that the idea of a *Weltbild*, or *worldview*—an image of the world in its totality⁴—is something that only became plausible in modernity.⁵ The construction of a *Weltbild* is what, for Heidegger, differentiates modernity in the first place:

Die Redewendungen ‚Weltbild der Neuzeit‘ und ‚neuzeitliches Weltbild‘ sagen zweimal dasselbe und unterstellen etwas, was nie zuvor geben konnte, nämlich ein mittelalterliches und ein antikes Weltbild. Das Weltbild wird nicht von einem vormals mittelalterlichen zu einem neuzeitlichen, sondern dies, daß überhaupt die Welt zum Bild wird, zeichnet das Wesen der Neuzeit aus. (83)

For Heidegger the becoming-image (*Bildwerden*) of the world in its totality is intrinsically linked to the formation of a subject that imagines this world: "Daß die Welt zum Bild wird, ist ein und derselbe Vorgang mit dem daß der Mensch innerhalb des Seienden zum Subjectum wird" (85).

What provoked Jay to respond was Heidegger's assumption that the *Weltbild* of modernity is hegemonically defined by Cartesian Perspectivalism.

⁴ Heidegger defines *Weltbild* as follows: "Bei dem Wort Bild denkt man zunächst an das Abbild von etwas. Demnach wäre das Weltbild gleichsam ein Gemälde vom Seienden im Ganzen. Doch Weltbild besagt mehr. Wir machen damit die Welt selbst, sie, das Seiende im Ganzen, so wie es für uns maßgebend und verbindlich ist. Bild meint hier nicht einen Abklatsch, sondern jenes, was in der Redewendung herausklingt: wir sind über etwas im Bilde" (89).

⁵ Note how this argument is similar to Blumenberg's reading of Petrarch's ascent to Mont Ventoux. Petrarch's vain desire to gain an overview speaks, for Blumenberg, to a rupture of the medieval subject position in favor of a modern one.

After briefly recapitulating the arguments of his 1988 text, Jay evaluates how his concept of scopic regimes has been deployed since the first publication. He discerns two basic patterns of application: the macroscopic and the microscopic. The macroscopic applications, as he writes, function similarly to Heidegger's idea of the *Weltbild* in that they attempt

to provide large-scale generalizations about the visual cultures of a period, however imprecisely defined [...] They alert us to the ways in which untheorized and often unconsciously adopted background practices may inform a wide variety of phenomena during a period, from urban design and the conventions of painting to philosophical and theological doctrines to interpersonal interactions and self-images. ("Scopic Regimes Revisited" 107)

On the other end of the spectrum, one finds "usages that focus on a very narrow and circumscribed set of visual practices and designate them as a scopic regime" (108).

The reason I adopt the term "scopic regimes" is because it contains some of the key assumptions that underlie my own thesis. It speaks to the notion that there are many things involved in how something appears to the eye. It implies that visibility is both socially and historically contingent and that the changes that occur in perception inscribe themselves into artifacts. In this regard, however, it is necessary to mention the problem that underlies all statements that deal with such presumed changes in perception. Florian Sprenger has pointed out the impossibility of speaking about perceptions *as*

such, since every perception is necessarily mediated, be it through images, technology or language (Sprenger „Über die These vom Eingriff der Medien in die Wahrnehmung“ 236). Thus when I talk about presumed changes in perception, I am referring to what Sprenger has described as the “weak hypothesis” of perception, the aim of which is not to speak about perceptions as such, but rather to engage in an “archeology of media effects” (“Über die These” 253) where changes in perception are inferred from changes in media technologies.

This project is, among other things, concerned with the way in which the city is made legible, how it is constructed as a problem that needs to be solved as well as a structure that threatens to escape into opacity (and thus needs to be made visually accessible). Scopic regimes enable me to take into account all that goes into this process. Jay himself saw the value of his term in its emphasis on the idea of a “regimen” from which regime derives. For Jay a regimen “implies a relatively coherent order in which protocols of behaviour are more or less binding” (“Scopic Regimes Revisited” 109).

Having identified the origins and affordances of Martin Jay’s term, I now want to explore three distinct modes of looking—three “scopic regimes”—which will serve as conceptual guideposts throughout the text. I inherit these regimes from a family of key texts, some of which can be considered canonical. The first is Jonathan Crary’s *Techniques of the Observer*. Crary argues from a similar perspective to Jay, and is of great importance for my own project. The

second is Guy Debord's *Society of the Spectacle* and his 1988 *Comments on the Society of the Spectacle*, which I will cross-reference with Andrea Wilson Nightingale's philosophic-historical inquiry *Spectacles of Truth in Classical Greek Philosophy*. Although Debord and Nightingale write about completely different social relations—the former is concerned with the ramifications of modernity and the latter with the cultural practices of Hellenism—the idea of the spectacle is central to both their arguments. Reading them alongside each other will allow me to specify my own usage of spectacle.

The third term is speculation, and here I turn mostly to literature that deals with what Armen Avanesian and Suhail Malik call the “post-contemporary time-complex” (Malik & Avanesian 8). Whereas observation and spectacle remain firmly lodged in the realm of the visual, speculation allows for an expansion of “scopic regimes” into the temporal. Inherent in the term speculation is not only a notion of looking, present through the latin root *specere*, but also a sense of hazardous play, a gambling with risk and contingency and an orientation toward an unknown and unknowable future. Whereas the observing subject is defined through its relation to space, the speculator orients itself in view of expected uncertainty. It responds to a situation where, as Paul Davidson notes in his recounting of the economic axioms of John Maynard Keynes: “economic decisions are made in the light of an unalterable past while moving towards a perfidious future” (Davidson xii). The speculative, as I argue via these sources, presents a condition where, as

Avanessian puts it, “the future replaces the present as the lead structuring aspect of time” (Malik & Avanessian 9). It is this special relationship to time and particularly to the future where the speculative differs most from both the regime of observation and that of the spectacle, as it adds a temporal (and economic) dimension to the act of looking.

2.2 OBSERVATION

To *speculate* acquired its contemporary meaning of investing money “upon risk for the sake of profit” in 1785. In 1610, deriving from the Latin word for watchtower or vantage point “specula,” speculating simply meant “to view from a watchtower.” Even earlier in 1590, it referred to the acts of viewing mentally, or of contemplation. The semantic spectrum of speculation comprises the act of viewing from a vantage point yet it also describes a certain relation to the future, a willingness to accept uncertainty and risk in order to realize profits. Equally present is the act of pondering and the rumination on various outcomes and possibilities.

The etymological roots of *observation*, on the other hand, as Jonathan Crary points out, lead in a slightly different direction:

Unlike *spectare*, the Latin root for ‘spectator,’ the root for ‘observe’ does not literally mean ‘to look at.’ Spectator also carries specific connotations, especially in the context of nineteenth-century culture, that I prefer to avoid—namely, of one who is a passive onlooker at a spectacle, as at an art

gallery or theater. In a sense more pertinent to my study, *observare* means to ‘conform one’s action, to comply with,’ as in observing rules, codes, regulations, and practices. Though obviously one who sees, an observer is more importantly one who sees within a prescribed set of possibilities, one who is embedded in a system of conventions and limitations. (*Techniques of the Observer* 5f.)

Observation in this sense means much more than looking. The observing subject, for Crary, is formulated against a background of cultural norms, technological infrastructure and epistemic convictions. Optical technologies for Crary are devices that take part in structuring the subject’s visual relation to the external world, i.e. they govern the embeddedness of a subject into a given “scopic regime.” The ambition of Crary’s *Techniques of the Observer* is then to describe how certain forms of subjectivity are brought forth by and correspond to optical apparatuses and relations of power. Similar to Martin Jay’s deployment of the “scopic regime” to map out the factors that historically govern the ways in which one does or does not see, Crary zooms in on the first half of the nineteenth century in order to examine how, in that time, “a new set of relations between the body on one hand and forms of institutional power and discursive power on the other redefined the status of an observing subject” (3). Just as Jay’s term is important for my project as it allows one to regard vision as being subject to historical forces in general, Crary’s idea that the early nineteenth century produced a particular observing subject is of equal relevance.

For Crary, the early nineteenth century witnessed a “rupture with Renaissance or *classical*, models of vision and of the observer”—a rupture whose conditions are generally misunderstood (3). Most scholars, as Crary contends, have agreed on the narrative that

with Manet, impressionism, and/or postimpressionism, a new model of visual representation and perception emerges that constitutes a break with several centuries of another model of vision, loosely definable as Renaissance, perspectival, or normative. (3f.)

At some point in time the dominance of the “scopic regime” of Cartesian Perspectivalism, if one rephrases the narrative Crary recounts here, was challenged by the emergence of an altogether different way of viewing the world—as testified by the works of art that have survived from that time. Another narrative, however, as Crary argues, contradicts this idea of rupture:

the end of perspectival space, of mimetic codes, and of the referential has usually coexisted uncritically with another very different periodization of the history of European visual culture [...] This second model concerns the invention of and dissemination of photography and other related forms of ‘realism’ in the nineteenth century. Overwhelmingly, these developments have been presented as part of the continuous unfolding of a Renaissance-based mode of vision in which photography, and eventually cinema, are simply later instances of an ongoing deployment of perspectival space and perception. (4)

The contradiction here is obvious. On the one hand there is an insistence of rupture and on the other of continuity. As Crary explains, it was this

contradiction that brought forth a number of false binaries, most prominently the “erroneous notion that something called realism dominated popular representational practices, while experiments and innovations occurred in a distinct [...] arena of modernist art making” (4).

This perceived tension between a popular mode of vision that adhered to a historical norm and the performative abandonment of this norm has been, as Crary writes, definitive for the formation of modernism. What Crary now attempts is to transcend the false binary between Cartesian Perspectivalism on the one hand and modernist rupture on the other, by describing “both of these phenomena as overlapping components of a single surface on which the modernization of vision had begun decades earlier” (5). For him, both the tradition of Modernist painting and photography “can be seen as later symptoms or consequences of this crucial systemic shift, which was well underway by 1820” (5). It is at this point that he brings the notion of the observer into play. As aforementioned, he describes the observer both in sharp distinction to a passive spectator and as being different from some kind of supratemporal “self-present beholder to whom a world is transparently evident” (6). For Crary, the observer is also not empirically localizable (7). Instead, what he wants to describe are “some of the conditions and forces that defined or allowed the formation of a dominant model of what an observer was in the nineteenth century” (7). To that end, he compares the observer produced by the camera obscura and the stereoscope. As an exercise in

formulating the relation between observing subject and social, technological and cultural conditions, it is worthwhile reproducing this comparison here.

2.3 THE OBSERVING SUBJECTS OF THE CAMERA OBSCURA AND STEREOSCOPE

In the 1500s, the camera obscura, in which an observer looks at the world in isolation within the confines of a darkened room

necessarily defines...[them]...as isolated, enclosed and autonomous [...] It impels a kind of *askesis*, or withdrawal from the world, in order to regulate and purify one's relation to the manifold contents of the now 'exterior' world. Thus the camera obscura is inseparable from a certain metaphysic of interiority: it is a figure for both the observer who is nominally a free sovereign individual and a privatized subject confined in a quasi-domestic space, cut off from a public exterior world. (*Techniques of the Observer* 39)

This model of an "interiorized and disembodied subject" (40) that exists in relation to the camera obscura comes up time and again in the history of Western science and philosophy. In Crary's words, it is a salient "metaphor for the most rational perceiver within the increasingly dynamic disorder of the world" (53). Crary thus reads the camera obscura as a machine performing both social and technical functions. Its aperture

corresponds to a single, mathematically definable point, from which the world can be logically deduced by a progressive accumulation and combination of signs [...] Sensory evidence was rejected in favor of the

representations of the monocular apparatus, whose authenticity was beyond doubt. (48)

As an empirical machine, the camera obscura re-produces the subject of Cartesian Perspectivalism. Crary also notes that to this kind of observer the city appeared in a certain way. As he points out, Antonio Canaletto's *vedute* views of 18th century Venice, in which the city appears like a theatre stage, clearly bear the inscription of the camera obscura as they "disclose a field occupied by a monadic observer, within a city that is knowable only as the accumulation of multiple and diverse points of view" (52). *Vedute*'s paintings, aided by the camera obscura, depict the city in an orderly fashion, organized in accordance with the laws of perspective. This method of depicting the city was a clear departure from earlier modes of visualization, first and foremost from the kind of "pre-Copernican, synoptic and totalizing apprehension of the city as unified entity" (52). In these topographies the city would appear as if seen from above, oftentimes showing not only the city itself but also the surrounding countryside.



Fig. 2: Canaletto: *London*: “The Thames River and the City of London from Richmond House.” 1747. Oil on Canvas. Private Collection. Wikimedia Commons. URL: https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/c/c0/Canaletto_london.jpg. [Last Accessed April 16, 2020].

The first half of the nineteenth century however saw the replacement of the subject of the camera obscura with an observer of an altogether different kind, who responded to a different set of ideological, cultural and technological conditions. For Cray, the corresponding technology in this case is the stereoscope. Whereas the camera obscura was constructed monocularly, around a single hole through which light fell, the stereoscope presented its contemporaries with the problem of binocularity, the perceived proximity of

what one saw within it and the apparent disorder and derangement of the image it produced:

In the stereoscopic image there is a derangement of the conventional functioning of optical cues. Certain planes or surfaces even though composed of indications of light or shade that normally designate volume, are perceived as flat; other planes that normally would be read as two-dimensional, such as a fence in the foreground, seem to occupy space aggressively. Thus stereoscopic relief or depth has no unifying logic or order. (125)

The field of view produced by the stereoscope presented a radical departure from the well-tempered reproduction of exterior reality that the camera obscura generated. The former, as Crary writes, shows one a seemingly incoherent “world that simply does not communicate with that which produced baroque scenography or the city views of Canaletto and Bellotto” (126). The relationship the stereoscope established between image and observer was “inherently obscene [...] it shattered the *scenic* relationship between viewer and object that was intrinsic to the fundamentally theatrical setup of the camera obscura” (127). Thus, the stereoscope no longer adheres to the “scopic regime” of Cartesian Perspectivalism, but already anticipates a relation between image and observer that would come to be associated much later with modernism.

What I hope to have articulated via my engagement with Crary’s text is the notion of a historically contingent observer that emerges as the result of a

distinctly configured and describable set of social, technological and cultural circumstances. What I argue throughout my thesis is that the observation deck, like the camera obscura and the stereoscope, also produces such an observer, one that I describe as the product of the spectacle and the speculative.

2.4 SPECTACLE

In 1967, Guy Debord apodictically described the spectacle as an all-encompassing force—an “epic poem” that sings not of the Trojan war but of the struggle of individual commodities (*The Society of the Spectacle* 27). The spectacle, for Debord, is the fundamental principle of a society in which “[e]verything that was directly lived has receded into a representation” (2). *The Society of the Spectacle*, as Marco Briziarelli and Emiliana Armano point out, was written in view of French society that during the 1960s was trying “to cope with the sudden process of modernization, which in other parts of the continent, such as England and the Netherlands, were happening more gradually” (18). Inspired equally by Lefebvre’s attempt to theorize everyday life and the brand of critical theory put forth by the Frankfurt School, Debord identifies the spectacle as the dominating condition of his time. An inherently destructive regime that re-organizes every social relation according to its own prerogative of favoring appearances over a presumed authentic “real,” and

which demands nothing but “passive acceptance... the spectacle is an affirmation of appearances and an identification of all human social life with appearances” (*The Society of the Spectacle* 4). Debord rarely goes into much detail about the historic genesis of the situation he describes, yet there is a sense that the pervasiveness of Spectacle is the continuation of economic, i.e. capitalist subjugation:

The first stage of the economy’s domination of social life brought about an evident degradation of *being* into *having*—human fulfillment was no longer equated with what one was, but with what one possessed. The present stage, in which social life has become completely occupied by the accumulated productions of the economy, is bringing about a general shift from *having* to *appearing*—all ‘having’ must now derive its immediate prestige and its ultimate purpose from appearances. (5)

The cover of the first edition of the English translation of Guy Debord’s *Société de Spectacle* showed the famous Eyerman photograph of the 3D-bespectacled 1952 audience of *The Bwana Devil*, an early example of 3D cinema. This, or so the cover seems to suggest, is the society of the spectacle: an atomized group of individuals passively engaging in the consumption of images, their bodies fixated, their mouths agape in astonishment. “The spectacle is the bad dream of a modern society in chains,” Debord writes in the 22nd paragraph, “and ultimately expresses nothing more than its wish for sleep” (*Comments on the Society of the Spectacle* 7).

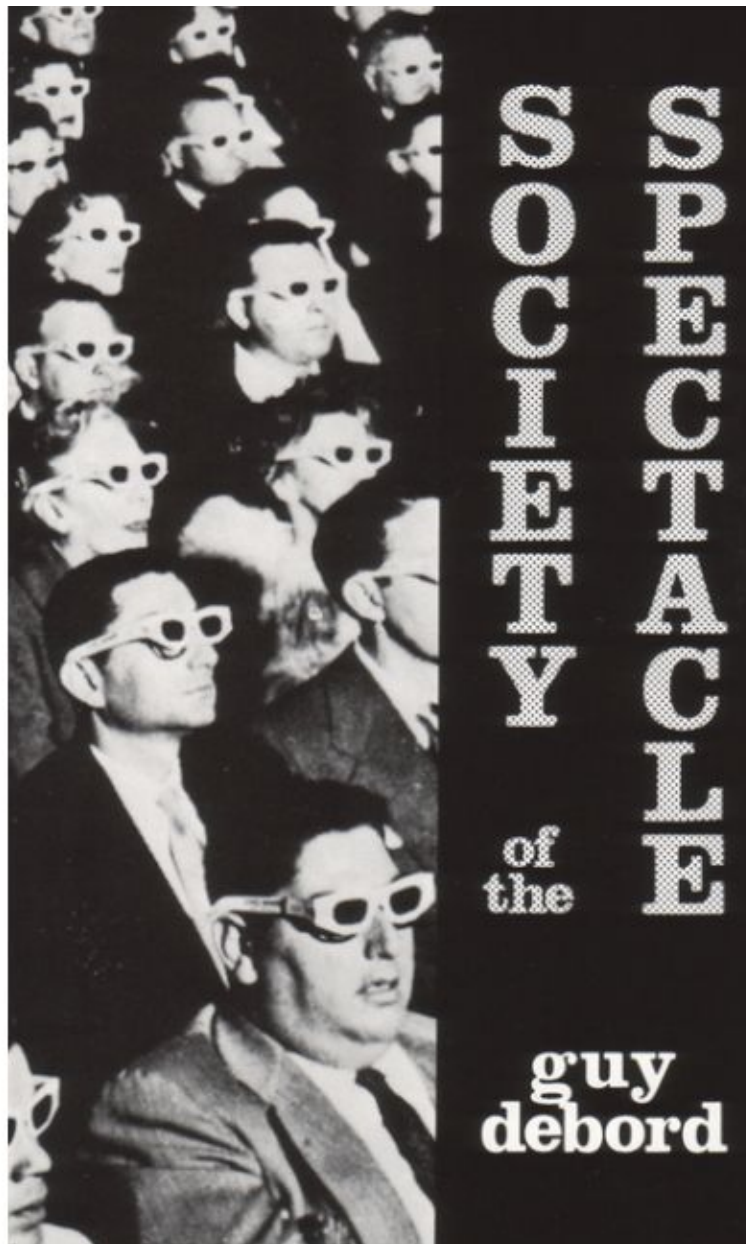


Fig. 3: "Cover of the 1988 edition of The Society of the Spectacle." AK Press, URL: <https://www.akpress.org/pub/media/catalog/product/cache/1ec012b46cbfe4262fc94f3e95ab2d9c/s/o/societyofthespectacleperlman.jpg> [Last Accessed August 21, 2020].

The fact that the cover identifies cinema as the original spectacle is notable insofar as the text itself does not delineate the spectacle in terms of its form but only in the relations it engenders. However, there are hints that the

cinematic dispositive, a crowd of people sitting attentively in a darkened room to watch light being projected onto a screen, serves as a model for the *Society of the Spectacle*.

An occasional filmmaker himself, Debord criticized the cinema extensively. In *In girum imus nocte et consumimur igni*, a 1978 video essay, Debord accuses the cinema of being a “deranged imitation of a deranged life, a production skillfully designed to communicate nothing” made for a present that is readily duped by such “craven mimicry” (00:15:46-00:15:59). This charge is brought forth in the form of a voice over, which comments on clips of the 1938 period drama *The Adventures of Robin Hood*. The insistence on a presumably “authentic” life from which one is distracted by its deranged copy describes, for Debord, the main principle of the *Society of the Spectacle*. Images, under the reign of the spectacle, are corrosive agents of separation, as every social relation becomes mediated (and eventually replaced) by them.⁶ In turn, there is a hierarchization of the senses, with vision important above all else:

Since the spectacle’s job is to use various specialized mediations in order to *show* us a world that can no longer be directly grasped, it naturally elevates the sense of sight to the special preeminence once occupied by touch. (*The Society of the Spectacle* 6)

⁶ Unsurprisingly, attempts have been made to link Debord’s dictums to contemporary issues. In *The Spectacle 2.0*, for example, Marco Briziarelli and Emiliana Armano describe the success of Donald Trump in the 2016 election as “the culmination of the politics of the spectacle” (Briziarelli & Armano 2).

The apodictic nature of Debord's spectacle makes it somewhat hard to work with, as one is left with the choice to either wholeheartedly confirm its validity or engage in a futile attempt to debate its existence. In 1988, Debord, commenting on his own work, pessimistically comes to the conclusion that "the spectacle has [...] continued to gather strength; that is to spread to the furthest limits on all sides, while increasing its density in the centre" (*Comments on the Society of the Spectacle* 2f.).

What is curious is that Debord never goes into much detail on how he arrives at the term, or his influences. The structure of his 1967 book, which is organized not in chapters but as a series of paragraphs, 221 in total, only emphasizes the prophetic nature of the text. Debord seems to not be interested in discussion but rather in simply stating the facts. In his 1988 *Comments*, the Spectacle is once more described like an enemy force, ruthlessly advancing, ever expanding the territory under its control:

The vague feeling that there has been a rapid invasion which has forced people to lead their lives in an entirely different way is now widespread; but this is experienced rather like some inexplicable change in the climate, or in some other natural equilibrium [...] many see it as a civilizing invasion, as something inevitable, and even want to collaborate. (4)⁷

⁷ Debord's fascination for military strategy has revealed itself elsewhere. A year prior to the publication of the *Comments*, he published *A Game of War*. The small booklet consists of the description of 55 moves of a boardgame that Debord, together with Alice Becker-Ho developed and that simulates military conflict. Like chess, as he writes in the introduction, the *Game of War* is meant to serve as a representation of war (8).

The existence of the Spectacle, for Debord, is simply beyond doubt and any debate around it can be seen as a pointless intellectual exercise, one that is “organised by the spectacle itself” (6).

Commenting on the nature of the spectacle, Jonathan Crary notes in an edited collection of Situationist International texts that Debord’s “*spectacle* not only persists but has become a stock phrase in a wide range of critical and not-so-critical discourses” (“Counter-Memory” 455). In his article, Crary then seeks to historicize Debord’s coinage of the word, and to provide the kind of genealogy of the spectacle that Debord himself excluded (456). Seeking nuance myself, it is productive to follow Crary in this attempt. A key influence in this unrecognized “prehistory of the spectacle” is, for Crary, Jean Baudrillard’s work at end of the 1960s (456). As Crary explains, Baudrillard’s theoretical engagement with the “increasing destabilization and mobility of signs [...]” and his observation of a “moment when sign value takes precedence over use value” can be regarded as somewhat axiomatic for Debord’s notion of the spectacle (457). Specifically, Crary highlights a section of Baudrillard’s *The Consumer Society* where the shift from *having* to *appearing* that Debord underlines is described frequently. In the *Consumer Society*, Baudrillard writes,

daily life is governed by a form of miraculous thinking, a primitive mentality, in so far as that has been defined as being based on belief in the omnipotence of thoughts (though what we have in this case is a

belief in the omnipotence of signs). 'Affluence' is, in effect, merely the accumulation of the *signs* of happiness. (31)

As Crary rightly points out, the fundamental collapse of reality into appearance that underlies the *Society of the Spectacle* is already present in Baudrillard's work. What the notion of the spectacle implies is a relation where, taking the example of Baudrillard, the difference between being happy and appearing to be happy is no longer sustainable. Under the reign of the spectacle, being and appearing have become one.

The relation that the observation deck has to Debord's notion of the spectacle is both obvious and complicated. As I will demonstrate throughout the case studies, one objective of the observation decks is to transmute the city from a lived reality into something to be looked at—a spectacle in the Debordian sense of the word. However, I want to get away from the primarily negative connotations of the term, where it appears only as the sign of the loss of some kind of essential reality. Such a reading will help to complicate the casualness with which Debord wields the term, and will add a semantic depth and complexity to the colloquial notion of spectacle.

2.5 THE THEORIC GAZE

For Debord, the spectacle is inherently linked to passivity, and is habitually equated with an uncritical surrender to whatever one is shown. It leaves no

room for ambition nor does it hold any possibility for interaction. Yet when exploring other ways in which the viewing of spectacles was conceptualized, one can arrive at a different, less cynical notion. In my own usage of the term I thus want to draw on the constitutive historical relation between theory and spectacle that Andrea Wilson Nightingale formulates in her monograph *Spectacles of Truth in Classical Greek Philosophy*. In the book, she describes how the effort to establish philosophy as a discipline and philosopher as a profession in the fourth century BCE was contingent upon the development of a unique method that came from the viewing of spectacles. To be clear, I am not offering a direct comparison between the social relations of Hellenistic society and those Debord diagnoses at the end of the 1960s. My only aim is to acknowledge that the term spectacle possesses a semantic depth that is lost in Debord's conception, and that its recovery is worthwhile. As Nightingale shows, the viewing of spectacles bears historical relation to the notion of theory, which is fruitful for my analysis of the observation deck.

“In the traditional practice of *theoria*,” Nightingale writes in the introduction, “an individual (called the *theoros*) made a journey or pilgrimage abroad for the purpose of witnessing certain events and spectacles” (3). In the cultural context of ancient Greece, these spectacles included “oracles and religious festivals” (3) to which the *theoroi* were sent by their respective city-states. After they concluded their journey, they returned to their home city and gave an “official eyewitness report” (3).

As Nightingale describes it, these journeys were liminal experiences, both for the *theoroi* themselves as well as for the cities that sent them. If theoretic gazing served as a constitutive element of the early philosophers' self-conception, the temporary departure from one's community, the viewing of spectacles and the subsequent report and re-entry into their respective societies also always brought with it a moment of destabilization:

He [the theoros] thus returns as a sort of stranger to his own kind, bringing a radical alterity into the city [...] Even in the ideal city, the philosopher is marked by detachment and alterity—he possesses a divine perspective that is foreign to the ordinary man. (5)

As it was uncertain what kind of ideas and people the *theoroi* would encounter on their journeys, there “was always the possibility that the *theoros* would be ‘corrupted’ by foreign practices and bring harmful ideas into the city” (44). The practice of *theoria*, as Nightingale explains, consisted however not only in the viewing of the spectacles themselves. The preceding journey, as well as the account of what one saw were also important:

The practice of *theoria* encompassed the entire journey, including the detachment from home, the spectating, and the final reentry. But at its center was the act of seeing, generally focused on a sacred object or spectacle. (4)

Nightingale invests considerable effort into understanding and conceptualizing what this act of seeing, so central for the *theoroi*, entailed. The journey and putting oneself at a distance were key elements: travelling to a distant oracle or a religious festival provided the *theoroi* with the opportunity to see

something with their own eyes instead of having to rely on reports by other parties (42). This emphasis on vision, however, placed particular demands on *how* the spectacles were to be viewed. As *theoria* took place at places that bore religious or ritualistic significance the *theoroi* forewent profane ways of viewing the world and instead

entered into a ‘ritualized visuality’ in which secular modes of viewing were screened out by religious rites and practices. This sacralized mode of spectating was a central element of traditional *theoria*, and offered a powerful model for the philosophic notion of ‘seeing’ divine truths. (4)

To see events in this way, as Nightingale describes, was concomitant with trying to let go of whatever could obscure one’s vision. As the events witnessed were of a divine nature, the way of perceiving them had to be free of any sort of influence. It was not enough to provide geographical distance; one also had to detach oneself from ideological frames of reference. This detachment from norms prefigures the practice of philosophy:

philosophic *theoria* ‘views’ and apprehends objects that are identified as sacred and divine. In this activity, the ‘spectating’ operates outside of traditional social and ideological spheres. Like the *theoros* at religious festivals, the philosophic theorist detaches himself from ordinary social and political affairs during the period of *theoria*. But this theorist goes well beyond the traditional *theoros*: the completely detaches himself from his city—and, indeed, from the entire human world—and engages in activity that is impersonal, disinterested, and objective. Indeed, he practices an

entirely new form of spectating that the philosophers attributed to the gods themselves (69f).

This conceptualization of the act of viewing spectacles is radically different from Debord's notion. The spectacular, in Nightingale's description, is not a pacifying, sedating force but rather an event that ignites a deep, contemplative engagement based on an idea of detached *autopsia*—of seeing with one's own eyes. Thus, the spectacular can at times refer to two conflicting "scopic regimes," both of which, as I will show, are present within the observation deck.

2.6 SPECULATION

"Speculation," writes Urs Stäheli in *Spectacular Speculation*, "has for a long time had the reputation of being an exceptionally unpopular field of study" (1). The highly risky practice of exploiting market fluctuations to realize short-term profits was regarded as something more akin to a moral vice than to a sound strategy of investment. Despite moral warnings concerning its potential "social and psychic consequences" (2), speculation, as Stäheli writes, had captured the public imagination long before it became the subject of serious economic thought. It was only at the beginning of the 20th century, more precisely toward the end of the 1920s, that speculation "became a constant object of public debates" (3) and was thus discussed not only as a practice of professional

traders, but also something that captured the wider public's attention. In his book, Stäheli concerns himself with the tension that arises from what he calls the popular conception of speculation, and the connected attempt to differentiate professional economic activity from mere gambling on a massive scale. He attempts to provide "insight into the complex discursive conditions that allowed the ideal speculator to emerge as a central model of economic subjectivity" (5)—a subjectivity which he regards as the direct precursor to the neoliberal subject of the immediate present.⁸

For Stäheli, it was the thrilling practice of speculation that played a key role in popularizing the idea of the market, eventually inciting a kind of "market populism" that "reached its preliminary high-point in the discourses of the so-called new economy in the 1990s" (6). During the nineteenth century, the stock exchange began to figure as a model or metaphor for a perfectly free and efficient market, where rational individuals made decisions concerning the buying and selling of assets with all the necessary information to do so. And they were able to do this within a system that was completely self-referential (20). Within this conception of the market, speculation figures as a variant of the popular, in that it injects an element of thrill seeking and entertainment into a system otherwise thought to operate in exclusively rational terms. It is this element that threatens to obfuscate the boundaries between economic investment and gambling as a form of entertainment. The latter, as Stäheli

⁸ In this regard see: Vogl.

explains, is exciting because it uses the medium of money as a means to generate a moment of uncertainty. Whereas the function of money is usually to reduce uncertainty, gamblers willfully immerse themselves in a situation that is entirely up to chance:

The gambler waits impatiently for the decisive moment—the moment that resolves the unbearable, yet extremely pleasurable, uncertainty. She enters a delimited time frame in which ‘normal’ monetary operations are suspended (26).⁹

As Stäheli then notes, the figure of the gambler frustrated “traditional modes of being an economic subject” (27), as his or her actions were guided not by the rational deliberations associated with the *homo economicus* but by the irrational forces of affect (27). Stäheli continues by drawing a parallel between the practice of gambling and the practice of speculation, with both, as he argues, functioning as “mutant form[s] of ‘normal’ economic communication” (27).

In their 2016 edited collection *The Time Complex*, Armen Avanesian and Suhail Malik develop what they call the post-contemporary from the idea of speculation. Whereas Debord spoke of the spectacle as the pervading force that governs all social relations, speculation, for Avanesian and Malik, takes

⁹ Note the ubiquitous presence of thrilling attractions within the observatory. The Skyslide in Los Angeles, for example, simulates a risky situation in order to generate a thrilling experience. Visitors take the slide knowing that it is perfectly safe, yet it still takes courage to go down it. With reference to Stäheli’s description of the thrill of speculation within modern economies, the skyslide might be described as an iteration of speculation as thrill.

on a similarly important role. During an interview that serves as the book's introduction, they argue that what defines today's temporal regimes is their speculative orientation toward the future:

Die grundlegende These des Post-Zeitgenössischen (post-contemporary) lautet, dass die Zeit sich verändert. Wir leben nicht nur in einer neuen oder beschleunigten Zeit, sondern die Zeit selbst – die Richtung der Zeit – hat sich geändert. Wir haben keine lineare Zeit mehr im Sinne einer Vergangenheit, auf die die Gegenwart und die Zukunft folgen. Es ist eher umgekehrt: Die Zukunft ereignet sich vor der Gegenwart, die Zeit kommt aus der Zukunft. (7)

This idea of a future that is happening before the present is, as they write, the effect of a society that is no longer primarily defined by human actors that are chronobiologically bound to their respective circadian rhythms, a mechanism whose breakdown Jonathan Crary already suspected in *24/7: Late Capitalism and the Ends of Sleep*. Instead, as Malik and Avanesian write, non-human actors, networks and infrastructures increasingly determine the organizational principles of society. It is a hallmark of these systems that they function independently from human temporal categories. The result is a diminishing of the present, as the future becomes the predominant category:

Dementsprechend verliert auch die Gegenwart als primäre Kategorie der menschlichen Erfahrung (zumindest so wie biologisch empfunden wird – als Grundlage sowohl für das Verständnis der Zeit, als auch dessen was Zeit *ist* (oder zumindest, was sie vorgeblich sein soll ihre Vorrangstellung). (8)

Riffing on their proposition of the post-contemporary, Elena Esposito suggests that the speculative regime is the result of capitalist transformations, and the way temporality is conceived in modernity. In contrast to Heidegger who saw the possibility of a *Weltbild* as the condition for modernity, Esposito, arguing in a similar vein to Reinhart Koselleck, sees the relation toward time as its quintessential “invention.”

The renunciation of eschatological prophecies, writes Koselleck, and the suppression of the idea that the future is both set and knowable, marks the emergence of the modern state. As soon as questions of peace and war were no longer determined by prophetic assumptions about the course of the world but became subject to political considerations, the idea of prophecy, so defining for the Christian worldview, lost its paradigmatic character. Whereas it was still possible for Newton, as Koselleck notes, to date the end of papal reign (and thus the end of the Christian era) to the year 2000, the assumption of a knowable future diminishes at the end of the 17th century:

Die Selbstverständlichkeit, mit der sich die Erwartungen gläubiger Christen oder Weissagungen jedweder Art in politische Handlungen umsetzten, war seit 1650 dahin. Politische Berechnung und humanistischer Vorbehalt steckten einen neuen Horizont der Zukunft ab. Weder das große Weltende noch die vielen kleinen konnten anscheinend den Lauf menschlicher Dinge etwas anhaben. Statt der erwarteten Endzeit hatte sich tatsächlich eine andere, eine neue Zeit eröffnet. (27)

It is this departure from a prophetic idea of time that makes the common differentiation between antiquity, the Middle Ages and the modern era feasible. To live in the modern era means to live under a different temporal regime (28). Contrary (or rather complementary) to Heidegger, it is not only the emergence of a world-image that marks modernity, but also a shifting relation toward time. This in turn makes the development of different strategies necessary. It is here that speculation comes into play. Instead of assuming that the course of the future is set by divine powers and that this course can manifest itself in the form of prophecies, modernity, as Koselleck writes, demands a different technique—one which takes into account the present situation in order to consider the probability of certain futures (29f.). Political action in the present is now formulated in view of the consequences one expects to occur. Factors like life expectancy, especially the life expectancy of potentates, become important indices of political calculations (32). However, as Koselleck notes, the openness of the future, as it was conceptualized in the 18th century, was still fenced in by the assumption of the naturalness of the absolutist order. Thus, a dynastically bound, consistent political personnel limited its horizon. This led to a conception of the future that bore the imprint of medieval notions of time, which was essentially circular:

Eingespielt auf Leben und Charakter handelnder Personen, konnte die europäische Fürstenrepublik tatsächlich ihre Geschichte noch naturhaft

verstehen [...] Die dieser Geschichtserfahrung eigene Wiederholbarkeit band die prognostizierte Zukunft an die Vergangenheit zurück. (32)

Elaborating on Koselleck's argument, Esposito states that modernity, or *Neuzeit* in German, does away with Cicero's dictum of "historia magistra vitae," i.e. the assumption that studying the past teaches us how to act in the future (Esposito 37). Instead, for Esposito, the temporal regime of modernity is governed by a sense of discontinuity concomitant with the idea that the future is not only unknown but unknowable.

As a key example of this re-organization of temporal regimes, both Esposito and Avanesian/Malik cite the derivative, a financial product whose defining quality is the way it allows one to access the future while remaining in the present. Derivatives designate a class of financial products that derive their value from an underlying asset. One class of derivatives is the so-called futures contracts where two or more parties agree on either the purchase or the delivery of a certain asset in the future, with both the current (or "spot price") of the asset as well as the future price on delivery being agreed upon. Future contracts thus allow investors to speculate on the price of the asset in question, which might change to their benefit. If, for example, one party promises to buy a barrel of crude oil at \$50 in the future, expecting that the price of oil will go up, yet at the date set in the contract the price of oil has actually fallen to \$10, the selling party has made a profit. Other types of options do not even bind the parties to either buy or sell an asset; instead,

what is being traded is only the option to do so at a certain point in the future. “One builds the future,” as Esposito puts it in *The Future of Futures*, “without planning or determining it. One produces the possibility that it becomes possible (without knowing or having to know how)” (35).

Traditionally, these assets could be stocks, indexes, commodities, currencies etc. Arguing historically, Ernst Juerg Weber, however, points out that this definition of a derivative is overly narrow, as derivatives are not necessarily bound to the value of a certain asset:

A derivative should not be defined as a financial instrument whose value depends (is derived) from the value of some underlying asset because there is no such asset in the case of weather derivatives, electricity derivatives and derivatives whose value depended on the outcome of papal elections in the sixteenth century [...] Therefore, financial textbooks [...] now define derivatives as financial instruments whose value can depend on ‘almost any variable.’ (433)

Weber in turn proposes to regard the derivative simply as a “promise with a default option” (434). Future contracts and other forms of derivatives can also themselves be sold and resold, giving investors an opportunity to actively manage the risk associated with a certain contract, to secure themselves against expected losses, or to increase short-term liquidity. As Elena Esposito explains in *The Future of Futures*, they only become plausible under an increasingly self-referential logic of the market:

This kind of traffic [resulting from the trading of derivatives] makes sense only when markets become unstable, as happened in the 1970s¹⁰ after the abandonment of the Bretton Woods agreement, because they no longer refer to an external reality, but to their own reality that is created by financial transactions and the way they are observed. (108)

Derivative trading, for Esposito, is a symptom of a broader transition from a capitalist logic of production to credit logic inherent to the financial economy (39). This transition is concomitant with a shift in temporal regimes. Whereas capitalism exploited presence to generate future profits, the financial economy is seeking to make the future usable within the present (39). Financial instruments such as derivatives lead to a rampant multiplication of various futures and a massive swelling of virtual markets.¹¹ To operate successfully on such markets one needs to know how likely it is that certain future does or does not arrive, a task that is delegated to statistical simulations able to compute the likeliness of a given scenario. This construction of various futures coupled with the desire to anticipate it with the help of computational or

¹⁰ The assertion that derivative trading only became significant after the changes in monetary policy post-1970 is actually a point of contestation for Weber. Derivatives trading, he writes, was possible as soon as humans were able to make credible promises within a stable legal framework (434). In his article, he traces the futures trade back to Mesopotamia. Here, future contracts were formulated in cuneiform script and written down on clay tablets. The possibility to write down contractual obligations led to a sophisticated system of future contracts. As an example, Weber cites an instance where three farming brothers borrowed barley seeds from the royal granaries, guaranteeing that they would return the same amount of seeds once the harvest was brought in (435). Weber suspects that due to existing irrigation systems the risk of crop failure was relatively low. He also assumes that the royal granaries were unlikely to enforce the contract in the case of a drought, so the risk associated with the contract was somewhat evenly distributed between buyer and seller, i.e. the farmers and the state (cf. Weber 2008: 435)

¹¹ The global derivatives market is estimated to have a volume of over 1 quadrillion USD. In the first half of 2019, the sum of outstanding contracts amounted to 640 trillion USD (Maverick).

statistical models then leads to a peculiar constellation that Esposito calls the “blind spot” of the financial markets. This blind spot consists in the impossibility of having a statistical or computational model that takes into account its own predictions. Somewhat paradoxically, the attempt to anticipate the future leads to it being unknowable.

Finanzmodelle können alle möglichen zukünftigen Kurse auf den Märkten vorausberechnen, nur nicht die Zukunft einer modellgeleiteten Finanzwirtschaft – die einzige Zukunft die später eintreten wird. (42)

Speculation, as Avanesian/Malik and Esposito describe it, marks therefore a particular relation toward time that derives from the logics of financial markets. It is a technique that responds to the impression that the present is dictated by the future.

However, apart from Esposito’s “blind spot,” the optical component present in the term “speculation” is not addressed at all. Indeed, speculation in this context seems far removed from its etymological root. In order to return to the topic of this dissertation I want to speculate on how the speculative moment inherent in the contemporary financialized economy relates to the notion of the spectacular that, at least partly, underlies the observation deck. Returning to Jay’s proposition of the “scopic regime” as a way to come to terms with how “untheorized and often unconsciously adopted background practices may inform a wide variety of phenomena during a period” (“Scopic Regimes Revisited” 107), can one speak of a “speculative scopic regime”? For

Crary, the camera obscura formed the site where a “discursive formation intersects with material practices” (*Techniques of the Observer* 31). It also presented a model that outlined how the position of the viewing subject shifts over time. Until the beginning of the 19th century it represented the “site within which an orderly projection of the world, of extended substance, is made available for inspection of the mind” (46). And for Debord, the cinema, and the passive gawking it encouraged, represented the principle sustaining the “society of the spectacle.”

I propose that the derivative is an equally influential model—a mechanism, that, although immaterial and non-spatial, presents a similarly potent interface that in turn configures a “post-contemporary” non-human subject. Unlike Crary’s observing subjects whose gaze is directed towards space, or the pitiful members of the “society of the spectacle,” the speculative subject is fixated upon the movements of an unknowable future.

At the same time, the principle of speculation sustains the observatory on a more pragmatic level: it is a convenient vehicle for capital investment. One could even say that this is its *raison d’être*. In short, its appearance is the result of an oversupply of capital, which was the result of the changes in US monetary policy after 1970. Following the transferal of “the duty and burden of the markets to steer and control themselves” (Esposito 116) after 1971, the economic climate generated favorable conditions for speculation on an

unprecedented scale. Whereas movements on the financial markets had until then been at least somewhat stabilized by the gold-standard, now

the liberalization of the markets led to the fluctuation of exchange rates, to instability and large oscillations in financial prices, ultimately giving rise to new speculative opportunities [...] which greatly increase the magnitude of international capital flows. (116)

This oversupply then seeks to create investment opportunities, and observation decks offer themselves as such an opportunity.

I will elaborate on this in the following chapter, when I discuss the Tulip. For now, I want to inquire further into the ways in which one is able to conceptualize architecture in the register of the speculative. Approaching the observatory, I will apply the categories of observation, spectacle and speculation to a number of texts that, each in their own way, thematize a view from above. This section is both meant as a test of the validity of the concepts and also serves as an exploration of one of the key themes of this project: the way in which the view from above is described and conceptualized.

2.7 TOWARDS A TYPOLOGY OF THE VIEW FROM ABOVE

The observation deck itself is part of a long tradition of viewing the world from an elevated position. The following section serves as a broader framing device for this project whose method, for the large part, consists in theorizing this elevated point of view. The brief history of elevated subjects which I outline is

also an inquiry into how the elevated gaze has configured itself over time along the speculative and the spectacular. I conclude the section with a brief discussion of Patrick Geddes' Outlook Tower, a building that not only sought to synoptically represent the entirety of the world as a vertical journey which began with a visit to a camera obscura, but whose architect wanted it to act as a prototype for all museums. Evolutionary biologist and self-proclaimed polymath Geddes conceived Outlook Tower as a means to encourage Edinburgh university students at the end of the 19th century to think beyond disciplinary boundaries. But first, I want to focus on a much earlier iteration of an elevated view, described by Petrarch at the beginning of the 14th century.

2.8 STANDING LIKE ONE DAZED

According to his own account given in a letter to Dionisio da Borgo San Sepolcro, Petrarch began his climb to the top of *Mont Ventoux* on April 26, 1336, simply because he wished to “see what so great an elevation had to offer” (Petrarch 308). Petrarch's text can be read as an attempt at *automythopoeisis*. The humanist scholar and poet carefully crafts a narrative of transformation, the protagonist of which is himself. In this sense the question of whether or not this is a truthful account is negligible. Apparently, the sight of the “windy peak,” a 1992m high mountain that lies to the northeast of Avignon as part of the Provence Prealps, had always intrigued the humanist scholar and

poet. The decision to climb on top of it, however, came while he was re-reading Livy's *History of Rome* and, in particular, a passage where Philip of Macedon described how from the top of Heamos Mons (the Balkan Mountains) one was able "to see two seas, the Adriatic and the Euxine" (308). After having trouble finding a suitable companion, with candidates being either "too apathetic," "over-anxious," "too sad" or "over-cheerful," (309) he eventually settles on his brother. With him, Petrarch makes his way toward "Malaucene, which lies at the foot of the mountain, to the north" (310). On the morning of the next day, he begins his ascent. After an arduous climb and an encounter with an old shepherd who in his youth had allegedly made the climb himself but had "gotten for his pains nothing except fatigue and regret" (309), Petrarch and his companion finally reach the summit. "I stood like one dazed," he writes to Dionisio, and "I beheld the clouds under our feet, and what I had read of Athos and Olympus seemed less incredible as I myself witnessed the same things from a mountain of less fame" (313f.).

Hans Blumenberg includes the description of Petrarch's ascent in *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age* as an example of a decisive shift in *Weltanschauung*. For Blumenberg the remarkable thing about this description, whether it is true or not, is the fact that Petrarch's motive for making the climb is sheer curiosity, an "appetite for experience" (339) which at the beginning of the 14th century must have been considered transgressive. The ascent becomes a

symbolic venture, in which desire verging on the sinful and pious timidity before what he had never set foot upon, daring and fear, presumption and self-recollection combine in an event whose attributes one could label 'deeply medieval' just as much as 'early modern.' (341) During the entire climb Petrarch is in doubt, wondering whether his desire to attain this view is tied up with his own sense of subjectivity. With the help of a pocket edition of Augustine's *Confessions*, he eventually manages to bring things back into perspective: "I was satisfied that I had seen enough of the mountain; I turned my inward eye upon myself, and from that time not a syllable fell from my lips until we reached the bottom again" (Petrarch 317).

The view from the top proves to be a liminal experience, writes Blumenberg, "one of the great moments that oscillate indecisively between the epochs" (341). The sheer curiosity by which Petrarch is driven to undertake the climb, and his amazement at the spectacular view, i.e. his fascination for earthly matters rather than the divine beauty of the soul, signify for Blumenberg the shift from medieval times to the beginning of the Renaissance. Petrarch's climb in this reading becomes a story of subjectivation. Blumenberg's account of Petrarch's mountaineering episode introduces a theme that is important to my project, as it posits a relation between a way of seeing and the subject that both produces and is produced by said gaze. And, at the same time, it argues that this constitutive relation is historically specific. In the case of Petrarch, this gaze falls equally into the categories of the speculative and the spectacular.

2.9 WHAT DO WE SPEAK OF WHEN WE SPEAK OF LANDSCAPES?

What does Petrarch mean when he writes that from the top of Mont Ventoux he can see the “Alps, rugged and snow-capped,” the “summits of the Pyrenees,” “the mountains of the region about Lyons” and the “bay of Marseilles and the waters that lash the shores of Aigues Mortes” (Petrarch 316)? What concept of landscape is emerging when he sighs “for the skies of Italy, which I beheld rather with my mind than with my eyes” (314)?

In the sixth and final essay in his collection on *Subjektivität*, Joachim Ritter, slightly differing from Blumenberg, reads Petrarch’s climb and his gazing at the surrounding landscape as an exercise in theory, or *θεωρία*—which means to observe, to look at, but also to partake in festivities.¹² What is more remarkable, however, is that for Ritter this theoretical gazing at the landscape, i.e. the division between nature and landscape, is what produces the concept of landscape in the first place: “Natur als Landschaft ist Frucht und Erzeugnis des theoretischen Geistes” (146). “Landschaft,” writes Ritter, “ist Natur die im Anblick für einen fühlenden und empfindlichen Betrachter ästhetisch gegenwärtig ist“ (150). For Ritter, the existence of a human beholder, who

¹² In *The Marvelous Clouds*, John Durham Peters, likewise with reference to Andrea Wilson Nightingale, also establishes a connection between theorizing and gazing. However, his focus is on the sky and not the landscape, pointing out how theory “as all our metaphors still suggest, was at first related to the sky. In ancient Greek *θεωρία* (*theōria*) meant looking or watching and is related to theater (like the English tie between *spectacle* as drama and *speculation* as thinking)” (167).

gazes at the surrounding terrain not in order to measure or to conquer it but solely for aesthetic pleasure, is what differentiates nature and landscape. Drawing on the writings of natural philosopher Alexander von Humboldt, Ritter characterizes the concept of landscape as an interplay between purely objective natural surroundings and the emotional, internal, aesthetic responses that surroundings evoke in the observing subject.

In der geschichtlichen Zeit, in welcher die Natur, ihre Kräfte und Stoffe zum 'Objekt' der Naturwissenschaften und der auf diese gegründeten technischen Nutzung und Ausbeutung werden, übernehmen es Dichtung und Bildkunst, die gleiche Natur—nicht weniger universal—in ihrer Beziehung auf den empfindenden Menschen aufzufassen und ‚ästhetisch‘ zu vergegenwärtigen. (154)

Ritter traces this idea of a viewing subject that connects the objective concept of nature with the aesthetic category of the landscape through both the history of western thought and the history of art. For example, Cezanne and Van describe how they internalized their surroundings, and how nature is transformed into landscape as if it is speaking through them (154f.). Petrarch's elevated view of the world and the clouds under his feet, then, become synonymous with an emerging worldview. On top of the mountain, Petrarch, much to his own amazement, is captivated by the landscape to a degree that is undue for a medieval observer but befitting for an early modern one.

2.10 FLIEGENDE STREIFEN

Blumenberg explores another account of an observer whose sense of self is shaped by the experience of elevation (342). This time, he writes about Goethe, who contemplates his existence on top of the *Brocken*—the highest point in the *Harz* mountain range in Northern Germany. Goethe allegedly climbed the *Brocken* during his *Harzreise*, which he undertook during the winter of 1777. As can be gathered from letters to Charlotte von Stein, Goethe went down before going up, visiting several mining pits in the same area until on the morning of December 10 he made his way to the top. In a letter sent to Johann Heinrich Merck the following summer, Goethe recalls his ascent. Like Petrarch who encounters an old shepherd that tries to dissuade him from his plans, Goethe meets an old forester at Torfhaus. At first the forester is convinced that climbing the *Brocken*, whose flanks are shrouded in mist and whose structure is barely discernable, is impossible. Apparently, the forester often thought about making the climb, yet convinced of its infeasibility, never did. But upon Goethe's insistence, the forester joins him on the climb. By midday, they reach the summit. Goethe writes:

[Ich] überwand alle Schwürigkeiten und stand den 8ten Dez. glaub ich, Mittags um eins auf dem *Brocken* oben in der heitersten brennendsten Sonne über dem anderthalb Ellen hohen Schnee und sah die Gegend von Teutschland unter mir alles von Wolcken bedeckt [...] Da war ich vierzehn Tage allein dass kein Mensch wusste wo ich war von tausend Gedancken

in der Einsamkeit findest du auf beyliegendem Blat fliegende Streifen [sic].
(Goethe 221)

For Petrarch, the journey became synonymous with a reconsideration of his values and an emerging Renaissance subjectivity. In contrast, Goethe's climb, described as both an exercise in viewing as theory as well as an experience of pensive solitude, appears to Blumenberg as an expression of *Sturm-und-Drang* subjectivity.

2.11 FRENZY OF THE VISIBLE

Whereas Goethe and Plutarch sought out natural elevations in order to gaze at the landscapes of northeastern France or "die Gegend von Teutschland," some centuries later these "outlooks of nature" (Barthes 241) are replaced by architecture. In Roland Barthes' case more specifically: the Eiffel Tower. "To visit the Tower," Barthes writes, "is to get oneself up unto the balcony in order to perceive, comprehend, and savor a certain essence of Paris" (241). In the same spirit as Petrarch and Goethe, Barthes uses his elevated position to formulate a theory. From up there, the entirety of Paris appears to him as "a total optical system of which [the Eiffel Tower] is the center and Paris the circumference" (237). To the semiologist Barthes, the tower also presents a unique optico-grammatical structure. It is "an object which sees, a glance which is seen; it is a complete verb, both active and passive, in which no function, No *voice* (as we say in grammar, with piquant ambiguity) is defective"

(238).¹³ Also, even though it has replaced natural outlooks, Barthes points out that “the Tower makes the city into a kind of Nature; it constitutes the swarming of men into a landscape, it adds to the frequently grim urban myth a romantic dimension, a harmony, a mitigation” (241). Fulfilling the fantasy of panoramic vision, which for Barthes was anticipated by literary works like Victor Hugo’s *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* or Jules Michelet’s *Tableau de la France*, the Eiffel Tower not only transforms the city into a kind of nature, it also engenders an entirely new way of looking at the world. With Barthes, one can find again the mutually constitutive relation that exists between a landscape, its observer, and the architecture that produces this observation.

Furthermore, the Eiffel Tower in Barthes description functions like a device that is able to decipher the complexity of the city and further one’s understanding of it:

[T]he bird’s-eye view, which each visitor to the Tower can assume in an instant for his own, gives us the world to read and not only to perceive [it] permits us to transcend sensation and to see things *in their* structure. (242)

In Barthes’ description, then, the Eiffel Tower becomes a tool which provides not only an overview but also a deeper insight into the city. It endows its visitors with a sense of comprehension—an intellectual understanding of the

¹³ John Durham Peters adds an acoustical component to Barthes optical theory, noting that the Eiffel Tower served as a broadcasting tower for TV and radio signals and is still “a channel of communication, its top still bristling with transmitting and intercepting devices” (238).

complicated system that surrounds them.¹⁴ For Barthes, this deeper understanding of the city brought forth by the panoramic overview is accompanied by feelings of euphoria, or, in his words, by “the bliss of altitude” (244). Here, the spectacular is brought together with the speculative.

The latter part of Barthes’ account is dedicated not to the view of Paris when standing outside, but to the interior of the Eiffel Tower. “We linger within it,” he writes, “before using it as an observatory” (248). Here, the sacrality of the tower meets the everyday operations of mass tourism: “[F]rom the ground level, a whole humble commerce accompanies its departure: vendors of postcards, souvenirs, knick-knacks, balloons, toys, sunglasses, herald a commercial life which we rediscover installed on the first platform” (249). The restaurant on the second platform—which, by the way, still exists in the form of *Jules Verne*, a high class *établissement* that serves €190 menu items including Breton Lobster on Black Truffle or Aquitaine Caviar—completes the tower’s “polyphony of pleasures” (250). This meeting of grandeur and gift shop that Barthes describes has remained one of the characteristic properties of the observatory up until today. Just as present is the affirmation that it is truly a must-see. “[O]f all the sites visited by the foreigner” concludes Barthes, who begins to sound more like a tourist guide than a semiologist,

¹⁴ This idea that the observatory makes the city comprehensible has haunted designers ever since, as I demonstrated in the previous chapter.

the Tower is the first obligatory monument; it is a Gateway, it marks the transition to a knowledge: one must sacrifice to the Tower by a rite of inclusion from which, precisely, the Parisian alone can excuse himself: the Tower is indeed the site which allows one to be incorporated into a race, and when it regards Paris, it is the very essence of the capital it gathers up and proffers to the foreigner who has paid to it his initiational tribute. (247)

2.12 “A SURFACE THAT CAN BE DEALT WITH”

Some years later, standing on top of World Trade Center, Michel de Certeau re-experiences the feeling of elevation captured by Roland Barthes on top of the Eiffel Tower. De Certeau writes:

Seeing Manhattan from the 110th floor of the World Trade Center. Beneath the haze stirred up by the winds, the urban island, a sea in the middle of the sea, lifts up the skyscrapers over Wall Street, sinks down at Greenwich, then rises again to the crests of Midtown, quietly passes over Central Park and finally undulates off into the distance beyond Harlem. A wave of verticals. Its agitation is momentarily arrested by vision. (de Certeau 91)

The emotion in de Certeau’s account represents what Linda Williams, borrowing the term from Jean-Louis Comolli, calls a “frenzy of the visible” in her landmark book on pornography, *Hard Core: Power, Pleasure and the Frenzy of the Visible*. Frenzy, for Williams, is an ecstatic, sensuous, carnal desire to see and to comprehend (36). Williams is quick to ensure the term is not misunderstood. Invoking the dyad of knowledge and pleasure that Foucault

described in his *Scientia Sexualis*, it does not refer “to an aberration nor an excess; rather, it is a logical outcome of a variety of discourses of sexuality that converge in, and help further to produce, technologies of the visible” (36).

There are some striking parallels between Barthes’ and de Certeau’s inherently erotic accounts of their experiences—de Certeau specifically speaks of an “erotics of knowledge” (92)—and the logic of pornography that Williams describes. On the one hand, pornography is engaged in the production of a “knowledge of pleasure,” that has as its focal point the human body; on the other, the observatory, in de Certeau’s and Barthes’ accounts, seeks to expose the city, to produce a kind of pleasurable knowledge about it that eludes the un-augmented human eye. The specific pleasure the view from the observation deck elicits, as de Certeau describes, is the “pleasure of ‘seeing the whole,’ of looking down on, totalizing the most immoderate of human texts” (92). Indeed, looking down from the World Trade Center, de Certeau writes, one is “lifted out of the city’s grasp” (92). Concomitant with this elevated state is a burning desire to know and to see more, to be transformed into a total observer: “The exaltation of a scopic and gnostic drive: the fiction of knowledge is related to this lust to be a viewpoint and nothing more” (92). What the observation deck in this case seems to provide is distance and abstraction. The city in this moment no longer appears as a social reality one is entangled in. Instead, it becomes a view, an image to be contemplated and speculated upon. For de Certeau, this is the specific fiction spun by the

observation deck: to be radically removed from lived reality, to be transformed from someone who *walks* the city, someone who *practices* it, to someone that simply *observes*. He repeatedly marks this difference between those who stand above and those who walk below by deploying textual metaphors:

The ordinary practitioners of the city live ‘down below,’ below the thresholds at which visibility begins. They walk—an elementary form of this experience of the city; they are walkers, Wandersmänner, whose bodies follow the thicks and thins of an urban ‘text’ they write without being able to read it. (93)

Like Barthes’ assertion that the Eiffel Tower “gives us the world to read” (242), the World Trade Center observation deck allows one to decipher—to read the text of the city that people write as they move through it. What the observation deck engenders then, for de Certeau, is a shift from active practitioner to passive spectator, a shift that also allows one to grasp the city’s inherent complexity:

The World Trade Center is only the most monumental figure of Western urban development. The atopia-utopia of optical knowledge has long had the ambition of surmounting and articulating the contradictions arising from urban agglomeration. It is a question of managing the growth of human agglomeration or accumulation [...] Perspective vision and prospective vision constitute the twofold projection of an opaque past and an un uncertain future onto a surface that can be dealt with (93f.).

As I will show in my chapter “On Top of the World,” the designers of the observation deck from which de Certeau formulates his assumptions indeed

shared the idea of translating the unruly sight of the city into “a surface than can be dealt with.”

However, de Certeau does not offer a genealogy of the observation deck. While he admiringly states that the “World Trade Center is [...] the most monumental figure of Western urban development” (94), he does not go into much detail on what this development actually entailed. This is where my project begins. Therefore, in the next section, I explore a relationship that de Certeau himself only hints at: the observation deck and the concept of urban planning. For de Certeau, the combination of perspective and prospective vision, expressed within the observation deck, enables “the transformation of the urban fact into the concept of a city” (94). In other words, the observation deck transforms the city both into a spectacle and likewise turns it into an object of speculative thinking, of future-oriented planning. “Linking the city to the concept,” de Certeau writes, “never makes them identical, but it plays on their progressive symbiosis: to plan a city is both to think the very plurality of the real and to make that way of thinking the plural effective; it is to know how to articulate it and be able to do it” (94). Further delving into this relation between urban observatory and urban planning, the next section will explore Outlook Tower, a proto-observation deck where some of de Certeau’s insights concerning the World Trade Center are already present.

2.13 ARCHITECTURES OF OBSERVATION

The accounts given by Petrarch, Goethe, Barthes and de Certeau reflect on how, in each instant, the surrounding landscape is brought forth by the combination of the viewing subject and their elevated position in an act of *θεωρία*. At the same time, at least in de Certeau's and Barthes' accounts, this theoretical gazing made possible by the observatory, turns the city into an object of speculative inquiry; that is, it becomes an entity that is not simply beheld but made comprehensible by the individual's elevated view. Indeed, by elevating the observer above the city itself, i.e. by isolating him from his own embeddedness within the social fabric of the city, he is free to contemplate it as one would contemplate an image. As their accounts also make explicit, the knowledge they gain by surveying the city from above does not leave them unaffected. Far from being representatives of the disembodied subject of Cartesian perspectivalism, they both describe their experience as a kind of frenzy, and a type of "erotic knowledge." Captivated by the spectacular sight of the city, they immediately begin to formulate speculative assumptions about what is shown to them. To recall Andrea Wilson Nightingale's text, the authors appear like *theoroi* of the 20th century, whose theoretical work is inextricably linked to their viewing of the city as spectacle.

This idea of creating a place from which the city can be made comprehensible will appear time and again in this project—most explicitly

when looking at the Top of the World. Therefore, I want to discuss this aspect in detail. My case study is Patrick Geddes' Outlook Tower, a peculiar project that was built toward the end of the 19th century in Edinburgh. There, the idea of the observation deck as a machine that makes the city comprehensible is already visible. What I hope to show is how the observation deck is inherently linked to the discipline of urban planning, and that its contemporary function can only be understood when this context is taken into account.

2.14 URBAN EVOLUTION

In the first chapter of *Cities in Evolution*, Geddes, originally trained as an evolutionary biologist, writes that:

[a]like in Europe and in America the problems of the city have come to the front, and are increasingly calling for interpretation and for treatment. Politicians of all parties have to confess their traditional party methods inadequate to cope with them. Their teachers hitherto—the national and general historians, the economists of this school or that—have long been working on different lines; and though new students of civics are appearing in many cities no distinct consensus has yet been reached among them, even as to methods of inquiry, still less to as results. (1f.)

Geddes' agenda is clear from the first sentence. First, he describes the city as a complex structure plagued by unspecified problems and thus in need of "interpretation and for treatment." Then, by emphasizing how the different

academic disciplines have failed to formulate an adequate response to these problems, Geddes makes the emergence of a new and better-equipped discipline appear inevitable. Time and again it becomes apparent how his own view is informed by his training as an evolutionary biologist. For him, cities themselves are subject to the processes of evolution. In this vein, Florian Sprenger highlights the fact that Geddes' philosophy was shaped by a distinct idea of the city as a system where the surroundings and the surrounded exist in perpetual co-dependence (*Epistemologien des Umgebens* 263). For Geddes, as Sprenger explains, it is this specific conceptualization of the city as an environment that allows for targeted interventions: "In einer Organisation wirkt jeder Eingriff auf das Ganze. Dieser Annahme zufolge verändert eine Modifikation des Umgebenden auch das Umgebene" (264).

However, to facilitate interventions into this system, Geddes deemed it necessary to gather information about the system in question, the city, and its inhabitants. According to his plans, the inhabitants of a city were to participate in these data-collections. Gaining knowledge about the city, as Sprenger explains, would then help in identifying "blockages" and instances of stagnation:

Durch die genaue Kenntnis aller Faktoren eines lokalen *environments* sollen die Stellen identifiziert werden, an denen der freie Verkehr und die organischen Bewegungen der Bewohnerinnen und Bewohner stillstehen. Geddes Stadtplanung besteht aus zahlreichen kleinen Eingriffen, die gestockten Strömen zum Fließen verhelfen sollen. (268)

Applying the principles of evolutionary biology to urban planning in that manner would allow both scholars and city inhabitants not only to get a grasp on a city's past and present—problems that for him lie within the respective territories of history and economics—but also to make projections into the future possible:

For it is surely of the essence of the evolution concept—hard though it be to realise it, more difficult still to apply it—that it should not only inquire how this of to-day may have come out of that of yesterday, but be foreseeing and preparing for what the morrow is even now in its turn bringing towards birth. (Geddes 3f.)

Here, one can detect a speculative ambition in Geddes' concept of evolutionary urbanism. By carefully observing the present conditions of a city through participatory data collection, one could then, ideally, deduce from that data instructions for the future.

Another core principle of Geddes' proposed science of civics—which would, he thought, benefit every inhabitant of every city—is the importance of having a synoptic view. This is a notion he claims to have taken from Aristotle, whom he regards as the true founder of civic studies.

He [Aristotle] urged that our view be truly *synoptic* [...] a seeing of the city, and this as a whole; like Athens from its Acropolis, like city and Acropolis together— the real Athens—from Lycabettos and from Piraeus, from hill-top and from sea. (13)

In order to see the city as a whole, however, there needs to be a facility where this synoptic viewing can take place. It is here that Geddes puts the idea of a special observatory into play: the Outlook Tower, the foundations of which he conveniently discovered in his hometown of Edinburgh.

The seven-story building was situated in Edinburgh's old town, right next to the castle. It had been operating as a tourist attraction since 1835, after Maria Short installed a camera obscura on top of the tower from which the surrounding areas could be viewed ("Our Story"). After assuming management of the building, Geddes puts his plans to develop the tower as a didactic tool into full motion. Outlook Tower, as Geddes called it, would incorporate all of the functions that an observatory in service of his idea of civic studies would need. In his description, it becomes clear that the camera obscura, still installed at the top of the tower, would play a central role:

A tall old building, high upon the ridge of old Edinburgh, it [Outlook Tower] overlooks the city and even great part of this region; and of the educative value of this synoptic vision every visitor has thus a fresh experience. Hence, for at least two generations before its present use, it has been a resort of tourists; and its camera obscura which harmonises the striking landscape, near and far, and this with no small element of the characteristic qualities of the best modern painting has therefore been retained; alike for its own sake and as an evidence of what is so often missed by scientific and philosophic minds, that the synthetic vision to which they aspire may be reached more simply from the aesthetic and the

emotional side, and thus be visual and concrete. In short, here, as elsewhere, children and artists may see more than the wise. (Geddes 321)

By using the preexisting camera obscura as an instrument in service of his idea of a synoptic view of the city, Geddes made a virtue out of necessity. It is also clear that he intended to preserve the populist appeal of the camera obscura. Addressing the emotional side of prospective students of “civics” would allow then for a more entertaining mode of study. By intertwining the idea of a future-oriented urbanism with the appeal of the camera obscura, Geddes’ Outlook Tower effectively intertwines the notion of the speculative with that of the spectacular.

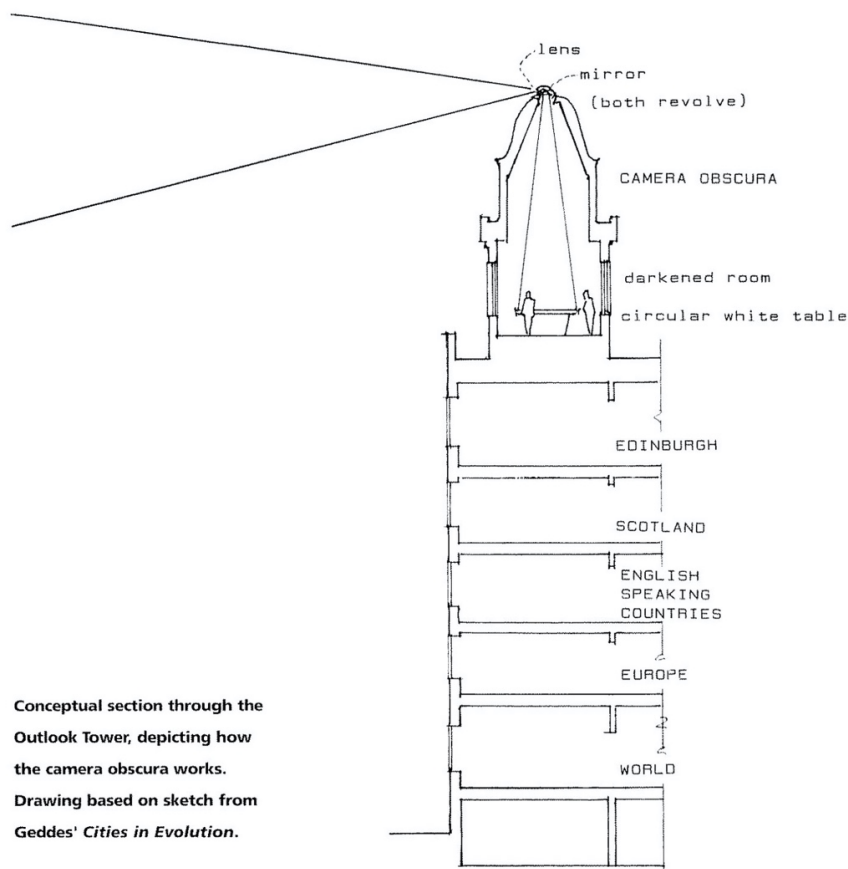


Fig. 4: McDonald, Ross: "Conceptual Section Through Outlook Tower." *Acts, Deeds, Facts, Thoughts*. December 1, 2009. URL: <http://vivendodiscimus.blogspot.com/2009/12/outlook-tower-edinburgh.html> [Last Accessed May 11, 2020].

The presence of the camera obscura and the fact that Geddes wanted to preserve its prominence within the building also shows how deeply rooted moving image technologies are within the observation deck. The camera obscura did not produce a still image, but instead used a revolving mirror to take into view a certain segment of the city. This segment was then projected onto a table where it could be viewed by the visitors. The camera showed

segments of the city life as it unfolded outside, producing a mutable, mobile view of the urban space surrounding Outlook Tower.

Although Geddes wanted to preserve the camera obscura section of Outlook Tower, he had extensive plans for its remaining five floors: organize the path one would take from the uppermost floor containing the camera obscura to the lowest floor as a continuous motion of scaling up. The floor right beneath the camera was dedicated to the city of Edinburgh itself, where

relief-model maps, geological and other, are [...] shown in relation to its aspects and beauty expressed in paintings, drawings, photographs, etc.; while within this setting there has been gradually prepared a Survey of Edinburgh, from its prehistoric origins, and throughout its different phases, up to the photographic details of the present day. In this way the many standpoints usually divided among specialists are here being brought together, and with educative result to all concerned. (323f.)

Traversing through the city-floor, visitors to Outlook Tower would be able to relate the image that the camera obscura had just shown them to the information provided through maps, drawings, models and so on. Again, it is clear that Geddes wanted to combine visual representations of the city with statistical data in order to generate a synoptic view. What is interesting is that he also wanted to dedicate some of the city-floor to a think-tank of sorts, a semi-public forum that would congregate in what he calls the “Civic-Business-room” (326). Here, experts from various fields could meet to discuss pressing issues concerning the city while being able to draw on various visual materials.

It is in that Civic Business room where the immediate benefit of Outlook Tower would become most apparent. There, “the main practical civic work of this Tower—its various endeavours towards city betterment” (326), such as the revitalization of Old Edinburgh, could take place. While the camera obscura would project an image of the city inwards into the tower, the ideas formed with this view at hand, and with the accumulated knowledge of statistical data and visual representations bolstering it, the tower itself was meant to help formulate an outlook, and to project a speculative image back onto the city in which it stood.

The rest of the available floors would draw the geographical circles ever wider. Beneath the city floor would be one dedicated to Scotland, then one to Great Britain, the English-speaking world at large, and Europe. Finally, the last floor would be “allocated to the Oriental civilizations and to the general study of man” (325). Geddes envisioned that eventually every city would have an Outlook Tower; its ability to generate a synoptic view was simply too beneficial to do without. This project, however, proved to be relatively short-lived: by 1977, Outlook Tower had assumed again its first function as a tourist attraction using optical effects. Today, it houses World of Illusion, a vertical theme park of sorts where visitors can interact with all sorts of optical illusions such as plasma balls or a hall of mirrors. However, within Geddes description of Outlook Tower one can recognize a familiar narrative, in which the city

appears as a complex problem, a puzzle that can only be solved by a facility capable of generating some kind of synoptic *overview*.

When de Certeau describes how, viewed from the vantage point of the Top of the World, the city appears as a readable text, one also needs to ask: how does the observation deck on which he stands contribute to the city's readability? The city in this narrative appears like an entity constantly threatening to disappear from view, to elude the grasp of the eye, and to become an unintelligible, inaccessible mess, invisible to those who have its betterment in mind. As its inherent complexity obscures the perceived need to visualize the city, an elevated and enhanced point of view becomes necessary.

As I have showed, observation, speculation and spectacle offer important insights into the history of the observation deck. In the next chapter I go on to focus on a contemporary example. The Tulip, a recently proposed addition to the skyline of London is yet another configuration of observation, speculation and spectacle. In many ways similar to Geddes' Outlook Tower as it too seeks to generate knowledge about the city via the deployment of optical technologies it is also connected to the order of the speculative on a more fundamental level. Relying on the expectation to generate financial gains in the future by selling spectacular views of the city, the Tulip both builds on and conflates the scopic regimes I have outlined above.

3. THE EXPERIENCE ECONOMY

3.1 NIPPED IN THE BUD: THE BRIEF HISTORY OF THE TULIP

In May 2019 Sadiq Khan, then mayor of London, vetoed an application to construct the Tulip, a 300m-tall observatory on 20 Bury Street, adjacent to the Gherkin building and directly in the City—London’s historic center and central business district. The Tulip was conceived by architectural firm foster + partners as a mix between tourist attraction, funfair ride and educational facility. Shaped like a giant asparagus—a slender stem made from reinforced concrete topped by a steel and glass bud—it was to add a spectacular sight to the skyline as well as provide spectacular views from inside. A large section of the available floor space was to be dedicated to a “Classroom in the Sky.” There, London’s schoolchildren could learn about the history of the surrounding city while visitors took in the view from glass gondolas that would rotate around the “bud” of the Tulip. Glass slides would serve to distribute people within the structure. The uppermost section would house a restaurant and bar with glass slides connecting the different floors.

A spokesperson for the mayoral office announced that “The Mayor has a number of serious concerns with this application and having studied it in detail has refused permission for a scheme that he believes would result in very limited public benefit” (Prynn). This rejection came as somewhat of a surprise

to foster + partners, who had developed the proposal in cooperation with the J. Safra Group, a global financial conglomerate. Some months earlier, the City of London had green lit the project, and for a time it seemed that construction would begin in earnest in 2020. However, the mayor's veto has stalled the project indefinitely. According to its website, the project team has submitted an appeal against the mayor's decision which is set to be decided upon in mid 2020.

The city's initial acceptance of the project and the subsequent veto by the mayor's office raises questions that go beyond the Tulip itself. This back and forth between the organs of government mirrors more far-reaching concerns around the functions of architecture and the role of the city. In this chapter I argue that the Tulip constitutes an ongoing attempt to introduce a scopic regime into the city of London that seeks to unite the spectacular with the speculative. With reference to the terms I have previously outlined, the driving concept of the Tulip, commonly marketed and referred to as an observation deck, is not so much *observation* but *speculation*. Whereas Jonathan Crary has posited observation as the regime that governed visibility throughout the 19th century, I argue that this regime has now been replaced by speculation, and that the Tulip is a symptom of that replacement.

Along these lines, I first intend to show how the categories of spectacle and speculation are combined within the Tulip in order to render the city into an image, and, in turn, to make that image consumable. My main objects of

investigation are the promotional images used to market the Tulip both to the public and to city officials. These images speculate on the Tulip's function as a piece of architecture that unites pedagogical ambitions with touristic entertainment. They are, as I argue, also inscribed with the future-oriented, speculative temporality of the financial market. Second, I want to situate the Tulip within the discourse around the "experience economy," and show how its rejection by city officials suggests an enduring uneasiness toward the guiding principles of such an economic model. Furthermore, I will investigate how the critical discussion around the Tulip rehashes an ongoing debate from at least the early 2000s, which seeks to come to terms with "post-critical architecture."

3.2 CLASSROOM IN THE SKY



Fig. 5: “Rendering of the Tulip’s interior.” The Tulip. URL: https://thetulip.com/contents/data/2018/11/DBOX_Foster-Partners_The-Tulip_Education_Kids_1536px.jpg. [Last Accessed January 21, 2020].

This render image (Fig.4), taken from The Tulips’s promotional website speaks of its varied ambitions. It offers insight into how the architects and designers envision a typical situation within the so-called “classroom in the sky.” A group of preschoolers are gathered around a holographic representation of the Tower of London that hovers above what appears to be a historical reconstruction of its fortifications. This, or so the image suggests, is a lesson on urban history. The teacher seems to have conjured this hologram up with her hand. Apparently, she can control the interface using gestures. While some of the children listen with great intent (one could almost read in their faces

expressions of awe) others have moved toward the glass panes in the background. Through the windows: another, differently mediated view on the city. Figure 6 highlights a detail that is hard to see on the original image: a fine, green mesh or grid overlays the Tulip's windows, and consequently the entire view of the city. This gives structure to an otherwise unruly view.



Fig. 6: "Rendering of the Tulip's interior. Detail (left corner)" The Tulip. URL: https://thetulip.com/contents/data/2018/11/DBOX_Foster-Partners_The-Tulip_Education_Kids_1536px.jpg. [Last Accessed January 21, 2020].

As Rosalind Krauss points out, the grid is inextricably linked to a split that occurs within the scientific literature on optics at the beginning of the 19th century. One branch, as Krauss explains, was concerned with the properties of light—properties which were presumed to exist independently from the human or animal observer. The other, more phenomenological branch—which was of greater interest to visual artists—dealt with the way in which light and

especially color were seen, how they interacted with each other, and how these interactions in turn shaped their physiological perception (57). The grid, as Krauss describes, served as a potent tool to illustrate these theories:

Because it was a matter of demonstrating the interaction of specific particles throughout a continuous field, that field was analyzed into the modular and repetitive structure of the grid. So for the artist who wished to enlarge his understanding of vision in the direction of science, the grid was there as a matrix of knowledge. By its very abstraction, the grid conveyed one of the basic laws of knowledge—the separation of the perceptual screen from that of the ‘real’ world. (57)

The presence of this “matrix of knowledge” within the classroom in the sky is salient. It reveals a suspicion that the simple view from the window and thus a reliance on human vision alone might be insufficient. The grid places everything that can be seen in a visual coordinate system and allows it to be pointed out more easily. In that sense, it operates similarly to the raised index finger of one of the teachers: look here!

Bernhard Siegert also sees the function of the grid as a technology of order. Within the grid, he writes, aesthetic, mathematical, topographical and orders of policing interact (93). For Siegert, the grid is a “‘Realitätsgebungsverfahren’, eine Technik, Welt als Welt von Objekten zu konstituieren, die von einem Subjekt vorgestellt werden, das heißt es [das Raster] ist operativ, differenzbildend und zielt auf die Beherrschbarkeit des von ihm Erfassten” (93). Following Siegert, one can say that the grid brings

things into view while at the same time it constitutes an observing subject. The view of London, as it is depicted in the render image of the Tulip, is subjected to the order of the grid and is thus made accessible as an *Anschauungsobjekt*—an item on display ready to be used within a pedagogical context. Without the grid or mediation, the observatory suggests, the city would appear as an inaccessible mess. With it, the city is manageable, readily processed into an object for study, a *figure*, or, when taking the Tulip’s touristic function into account, an image ready to be sold.



Fig. 7: “Rendering of the Tulip’s interior. Detail (right corner)” The Tulip. URL: https://thetulip.com/contents/data/2018/11/DBOX_Foster-Partners_The-Tulip_Education_Kids_1536px.jpg. [Last Accessed July 11, 2020].

As the grid assigns everything a definitive address and a location in space, it is an excellent tool for urban planning. Its success in this regard is, as Siegart

points out, partly due to the grid's ability to speculate upon the city's future expansion. It assigns an address to a building that does not yet exist, and thus allows for planning in the first place. It is an instrument of speculation. Expressed in the grid, a city's expanse is made visible before it comes into existence. And if the grid assigns everything a place and an address, then the index, which Siegert describes as a corresponding technology, allows it to fixate and discipline those who find themselves subject to it (100). In this way, it is also a gesture of power.

The city of London as it appears in the windows of the Tulip did not originally follow the grid system. However, after the great fire of 1666 there were indeed plans to rebuild the destroyed sections using a grid. Christopher Wren, the astronomer-turned-architect who was later responsible for St. Paul's Cathedral, suggested abolishing the unruly network of medieval streets and alleys in favor of a more rigid system, very much reminiscent of Hausmann's Paris. However, Wren's plans, along with many other visions of re-organizing London after the fire, were never realized. Instead, the city was rebuilt in a similar manner to before, favoring an organic, unruly, medieval structure with curved and narrow roads over the rigidity of the grid-system and Hausmannian boulevards (Forrest).¹⁵

¹⁵ This quasi-mythical story of a city being ravaged by fire and re-cast into a modernist grid-system is repeated elsewhere, as one learns from Hannah B. Higgins' *The Grid Book*. She uses the story of Chicago as a case study: an unsupervised cow kicks a lamp over, and the city is completely destroyed by fire. It then rises from the ashes as an improved version of itself—an

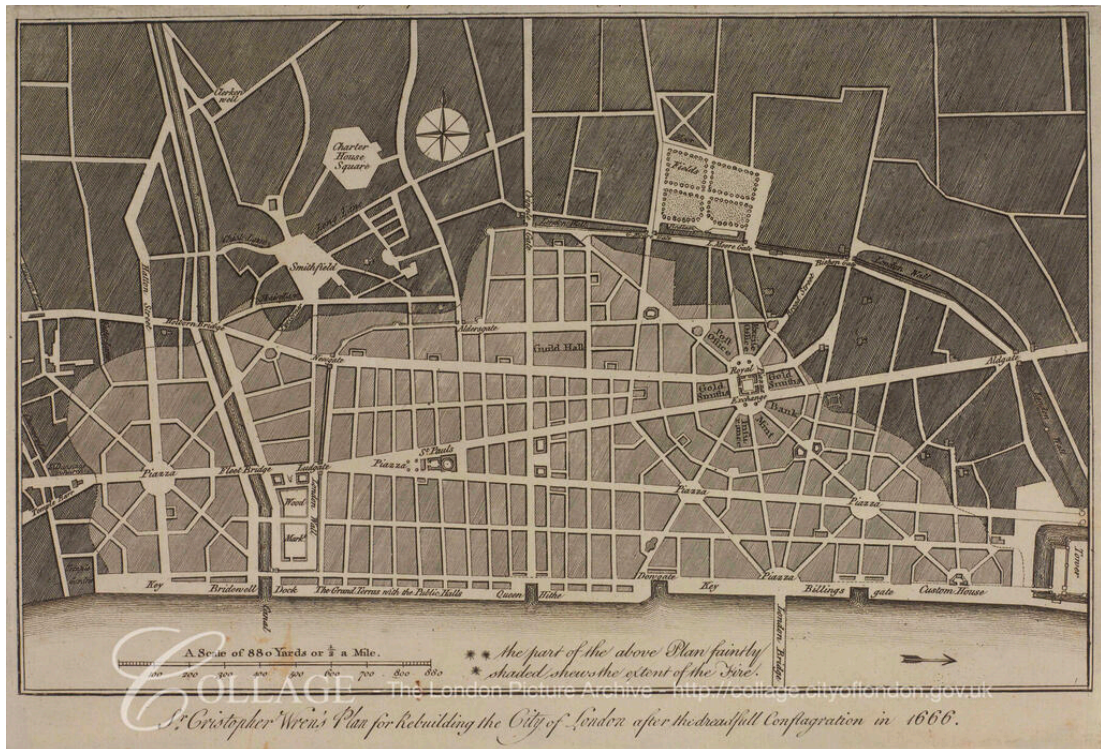


Fig. 8: Sir Christopher Wren: "General Map of London. Proposed plan for the rebuilding of the City of London after the Great Fire in 1666." 1666. Collage. *The London Picture Archive*. URL: <https://collage.cityoflondon.gov.uk/tempFileHandler.php?f=print10085857491980919222.html&dn=Image&WINID=1591941652867> [Last Accessed June 12, 2020].

In the Tulip, the grid seems to be retroactively overlaid on the view of the city, illustrating an attempt to impose a system of representation and order *after the fact*. Again drawing from Siegert, the grid appears here as a medium that unites representational and operative functions. The view from the Tulip's classroom shows a city in which everything can be found, identified and inspected. Everything that can be seen outside is assigned an address within the grid, a quadrant, and a fixed coordinate.

act that, according to Higgins, "symbolizes the predestined exchange of an agrarian life for one of efficiency and industry" (5) so essential for the foundational myth of the city.



Fig. 9: Rendering of the Tulip's interior (detail left corner) "The Tulip. URL: https://thetulip.com/contents/data/2018/11/DBOX_Foster-Partners_The-Tulip_Education_Kids_1536px.jpg. [Last Accessed January 21, 2020].

In figure 9, a small detail on the left corner of the image reveals yet another function of these windows. The little girl in grey seems to be drawing directly onto the windowpane itself.¹⁶ A bluish line traces the path of her finger. From the image it is not entirely clear what this gesture signifies. It may be that the large glass panes not only function as windows, but are also giant touch-enabled displays. Or, these large panes were to function *exclusively* as

¹⁶ It is significant that the speculative subject is a girl. As Beatriz Colomina has aptly pointed out with relation to the architecture of Loos, a feminine, outward-looking gaze is anomalous. The female gaze is typically configured as looking inward but never out. "Architecture is not simply a platform that accommodates the viewing subject" Colomina writes in *The Split Wall: Domestic Voyeurism*, "[i]t is a viewing mechanism that produces the subject. It precedes and frames its occupant" (83).

displays, and their apparent transparency is only an illusory effect. This transparency might then only be one of the functions of the interface. This reading is perhaps corroborated by the bluish shroud that surrounds the Tower of London, right in front of the two girls. Note how the hologram that the teacher has conjured up also depicts the Tower of London. Apparently, the window/display is able to highlight certain points of interest outside and depict them as three-dimensional holograms on the inside. This is a small but important detail. To be made accessible as educational material, the city first needs to be rendered into an image. Returning to Geddes' Outlook Tower, one could say that the holographic apparatus that was apparently to be installed within the Tulip is a contemporary version of the camera obscura. Both extract a section of the outside view and project it inside. Another similarity to Outlook Tower is of course the Tulip's pedagogical ambition to become a place where something deemed unrepresentable can be processed and made visually accessible.

3.3 THE SPECULATIVE AND THE SPECTACULAR



Fig. 10 “Rendering of the Tulip’s exterior”. The Tulip. URL: https://thetulip.com/contents/data/2018/11/DBOX_Foster-Partners_The-Tulip_Gondola_2560px.jpg. [Last Accessed January 21, 2020].



Fig. 11: : “Rendering of the Tulip’s exterior. (detail)” The Tulip. URL: https://thetulip.com/contents/data/2018/11/DBOX_Foster-Partners_The-Tulip_Education_Kids_1536px.jpg. [Last Accessed June 10, 2020].

Whereas the images from the Tulip's Classroom in the Sky show the view from within the building, Figures 9 and 10 perform a reversal of the gaze. The view from the interior was marked by the principle of speculation and observation, emphasizing that the Tulip is a sight/site that is as spectacular as the city that surrounds it. Assuming a hovering point of view, in the exterior view one can see bubble-like viewing capsules travelling along the three sides of the Tulip, reflecting both the view of the city and gleaming sunlight, like droplets of dew. Inside these bubbles small groups of three or four take in the view. Presumably being moved along at a gentle pace, they get to view the city from different angles and almost at 360 degrees. In contrast to the children inside the classroom, the viewers inside the bubbles are passive. Travelling on a preordained path, the view from the bubbles changes constantly, yet the visitors have no means of control or selection. As the mechanism that moves the bubbles along is hidden, visitors can enjoy the sensation of floating weightlessly. Here, the Tulip incorporates the function of earlier fairground attractions, namely the Ferris wheel. Viewing gondolas travelling on a circular path also seems to be inspired by the London Eye, an installation, that, not dissimilar to the Tulip, is an architecture of transport which sells a view in motion. As can be seen in figure 11, the Tulip was to incorporate three of these Ferris wheels, one on each side.¹⁷

¹⁷ This setup of spectators floating in capsules around an egg-shaped volume is reminiscent of Frederick Kiesler's vision for an "Endless Theater." In Kiesler's design, the audience of the

Taking a look inside the bubble on the left, one notices again the familiar gesture of the raised index finger. One member of the group is in a wheelchair, an important detail that highlights the accessibility of the elevator balls. On the inside, somewhat harder to make out among the reflections on the glass, are more visitors, all turned toward the windows, pointing or taking photos. Almost two thirds of the image is taken up by the city, which appears to expand indefinitely in all directions. The rendering utilizes a fisheye effect, allowing for a much wider viewing angle and thus contributing to the panoramic ambitions of the Tulip. Here, the Tulip again resembles the Ferris wheel, a piece of architecture whose sole purpose is to slowly transport people to an elevated position.

Endless Theater was envisioned to be “circulating in in electro-magnetic movements around the core of the stage” (Dymock).



Fig. 12: "Rendering of the Tulip's exterior, Bird's eye view." The Tulip. URL: https://thetulip.com/contents/data/2018/11/DBOX_Foster-Partners_The-Tulip_Birds-Eye_2560px.jpg [Last Accessed May 15, 2020].

The third and last render image of the Tulip (Fig.11) shows the building at yet another angle. It is an aerial view, but this time the Tulip is shown almost from directly above—an angle that underlines its verticality and emphasizes its singularity. The Tulip's height and verticality separate it visibly from the surrounding buildings. Other than the Gherkin, which was designed by the same office, the Tulip's makers do not seem interested in establishing visual coherence with the building's surroundings. Instead it presents itself as a futuristic, alien-looking, foreign body within the urban fabric. The small garden at the building's base which links it to the Gherkin seems more like an afterthought than a real attempt to establish a public space. The building thus appears to be strangely isolated or, to put it more favorably: it is presented as unique.

To again reference the optico-grammatical structure that Roland Barthes saw as characteristic of the Eiffel Tower, the Tulip likewise appears as an “object which sees [and] a glance which is seen” (238). Like the Eiffel Tower, the Tulip unites “both sexes of sight” (238) and “transgresses this separation, this habitual divorce of *seeing* and *being seen*” (238). Looked at it through this dichotomy, the Tulip, as it is presented in these render images, is a building that constantly oscillates between the spectacular and the speculative. It invites the gaze and celebrates its to-be-looked-at-ness, while at the same time proposes that from within it one would be able to see everything there is to see.

The emphasis on iconicness and the disregard for the specificity of a building's site are for Charles Jencks hallmarks of a contemporary strain of architecture. "A specter is haunting the global village," Jencks writes in an allusion to the *Communist Manifesto*, "the specter of the iconic building" (*The Iconic Building* 7). There was a time, as Jencks describes, when public or religious buildings

expressed shared meaning and conveyed it through well-known conventions [...] some old towns retain these relationships of power and meaning today: the tallest building may still be the central church or clock tower, the less prominent types might be the school and public library, and the minor civic buildings—the railroad and the police station—adopt a modest demeanor. (7)

This principle of the city, where individual buildings are cast into a firm set of relations which in turn reflect a certain social order, has, as Jencks describes, been replaced by a demand for "instant fame and economic growth" (7). The iconic building, he writes, is based on a calculated disruption of the guidelines that typically govern urban planning. It deliberately ignores its immediate surroundings, relying instead on the allure of its own stardom—its own iconicness. These buildings are not, however, as Jencks makes clear in an interview, icons of anything in particular. They are not representative in the common sense of the word. Instead, they are responses to the ambition and demand for iconicness coupled with an inability to agree on any image in particular:

Today, clients are insecure and society is completely pluralist and insecure, and doesn't know what it wants. But they (society and clients) do know they want a landmark. Weak belief plus the desire to have a landmark, plus celebrity culture, plus globalized capitalism, plus the art market's desire for the new; all those factors together produce iconic buildings. This is why we're in an iconic building era. (Jencks, "Interview")

Jencks' dismissive and rather broad remark about society's presumed inability to identify itself with strong signs echoes a similar dictum by his colleague William S. Saunders, who, in the preface to *Commodification and Spectacle in Architecture* writes that:

Spectacle is the primary manifestation of the commodification or commercialization of design: design that is intended to seduce consumers will likely be more or less spectacular, more or less a matter of flashy, stimulating, quickly experienced gratification, more or less essentially like a television ad. The stimulation that leads to 'Wow!' or to immediate sensual pleasure is most prominent than any implicit invitation to slow savoring and reflection. (viii)

As I will show later, the accusation that the Tulip appears as an underdetermined and empty sign, an "enigmatic signifier" (Jencks, "Interview"), is present within a lot of the critical responses to it. However, such a critique is overly fixated on the spectacular while disregarding the speculative aspect of the building. In terms of visuality, such critique seems to be directed primarily toward the building's exterior. Returning to the three categories of observation, spectacle and speculation that I outlined previously,

I suggest a different approach, one that takes into account how the Tulip's spectacular aspect relates to its speculative one. Considering the varied meanings the term speculation carries, the speculative is present within the Tulip in two instances. On the one hand, the situation presented within the Classroom in the Sky is one where the city is considered, historicized, and viewed quite literally from a vantage point.¹⁸ Here, the earlier meaning of speculation is important. On the other hand, the meaning most commonly associated with speculation today, i.e. monetary investment that hopes to realize profit while accepting risk, is even more apt. It is not at all surprising that the proposal again and again refers to the financial returns that the Tulip will one day be able to realize. It is a building based on the future-oriented principles of the financial market, and the latter's underlying promise to magically generate wealth in the time to come.

Unlike the other high-rises that make up the London Skyline, the Tulip was neither to include office space nor apartments. Its distinct shape would have made it unlikely that its floor space could ever be used for anything other than its originally intended purpose.¹⁹ Nevertheless, according to an economic impact assessment that was submitted with the proposal, the Tulip was to

¹⁸ Remember how the Latin noun *specula* refers to a watchtower or lookout post.

¹⁹ Commenting on the Burj Khalifa in Dubai, Stephen Graham mentions how the height of towers such as the Burj Khalifa tends at some point to be disconnected from any considerations of use value. Instead height, or rather verticality, becomes an end in itself: "between 15 per cent and 30 per cent of their height—the highest part, the so-called vanity height—is so slim as to be capable of housing only lift shafts and services" (ix). In the Tulip, one could say, this principle of vanity defines the building in its entirety.

generate almost a billion pounds in total monetized value as well as several hundred full time jobs during its projected lifespan of twenty years (Jacob Safra Group). This was in addition to the presumably invaluable educational benefit. In their proposal, foster + partners and the J. Safra Group also repeatedly underline how the Tulip would fit in with the City of London's developmental vision of the Culture Mile, an initiative aimed at transforming a part of the northwest section of the City into an urban incubator/world-class tourist destination. The Culture Mile, according to this vision, would have "creative exchange, cultural collaboration and learning at its core in an area where 2,000 years of history collide with the world's best in culture" (City of London). Taking up this narrative of urban transformation under the aegis of profit enabled through "creativity," the Tulip project team repeatedly points out how the observatory would contribute substantially towards this branding of the City as a "world-renowned destination" (City of London).

As Peter Mörtenböck and Helge Mooshammer point out, the shifts within the financial system since the 1980s²⁰ and

[the] subsequent urge in demand for investment opportunities by rapidly swelling pools of international capital has led to a focus on architectural

²⁰ The authors take this chronology from Saskia Sassen. In a 2012 article, Sassen situates the subprime-mortgage crisis of 2008 within a larger trend of "the financializing of non-financial domains" (Sassen 2012:76) and the deregulation of financial markets—a trend that she describes as having begun in the 1980s (cf. Sassen 2012:78). This period saw the emergence of, among other innovations, exotic financial instruments such as credit-default swaps that allow different parties to separate the risk associated with a certain asset (e.g. mortgage-backed-securities). For Sassen, the byzantine nature of these instruments greatly exacerbated the gravity of the 2008 financial crisis.

spaces as investment securities, with an emphasis on the promise of future market potential rather than conventional collateral backed by an underlying use value. (109)

The oversupply of capital led to an economic climate where architecture is regarded almost exclusively for its ability to realize future value, which in turn means that, as they write, “urban life in the present becomes subordinate to an economy of future options” (109).

The Safra Group’s repeated assurance that the Tulip was bound to create revenue in the foreseeable future is a sign of that subordination. Indeed, it speaks clearly of the significant shift in the “performance targets” (109) of architecture that Mörtenböck and Mooshammer describe. The same goes for the narrative in which the Tulip appears as a logical continuation of the City’s transformation into a “world class tourist destination.” Here, the notion of what Mörtenböck and Mooshammer call the “urban frontier” is relevant. This frontier, they write

is not a given space, but rather created through a series of advances aiming to structure a field of options [...] Urban frontiers, in particular, are currently manifested at the contact points between new areas of economic endeavor and the established realities of a society. Such frontiers are increasingly marked by a wide range of ‘spatial products’: patterns of architectural form and spatial organization that are bundled together with financial incentives, statutory privileges, and cultural aspirations—tradable packages to place bets on the future. (110)

The metaphorical soil from which the Tulip sprouts is composed of an overabundance of capital to be invested, and represents the pressing need of cities to stay visible on a competitive global market. Fostered by an economic climate that perceives “architectural spaces [...] as a theater of speculative investment” (109), the Tulip promotes the spectacularizing of the city, not only through its perceived iconicness and alienness within the London skyline, but also the way its interior constructs the outside view as a spectacular (and commodifiable) *sight*. This, in turn, renders London as a desirable *destination*.²¹

This “economy of future options” that Mörtenböck and Mooshammer describe also finds a direct expression in the render images of the Tulip. These images are much more than representations. Instead, in speaking to us in the future perfect tense, they operationalize the logic of the finance economy. They are speculative images insofar as they describe a certain reality that is not only desirable, but also something that has already happened. Here, the visuality that the Tulip perpetuates extends from the spatial into the temporal. Already, there are children in awe, gathered in the Classroom in the Sky; already, there are visitors dining under the glass dome. Celebrating a speculative view, these images render the Tulip itself as subject to the speculative regime of financialization.

²¹ Architectural critic and researcher Davide T. Ferrando has briefly commented on this aspect of the render image in a 2018 article called *The City as Advertising*. These images, he writes, regardless of the seemingly different realities they intend to describe are all alike in that they “speak the language of the market” (1). Other than providing seductive narratives for potential investors, they all inevitably “reproduce the same idea of city” (1).

All three of the scopic regimes I outlined in the introduction are found to various degrees within the Tulip. It presents a space where rules and sites are equally observed, and where notions of spectacle are ever-present both in the interior and the exterior. The Tulip is also a building characterized by speculation—both at the level of what was supposed to happen inside it, as well as the practices of financial speculation that make such a project plausible in the first place. Expanding on the argument by Mooshammer and Mörtenböck, the Tulip, and the conflation of the spectacular and the speculative it promotes, is the expression of a contemporary architectural paradigm. Subsequently, I want to trace the emergence of this paradigm back to a debate around what has become known as “post critical architecture.” However, before turning to that, I want to look briefly at how the Tulip itself was received.

3.4 A FAILED PROJECT?

In a nutshell, the Tulip’s critical reception was not good. Although critics like Justin Davidson readily acknowledge that “[r]enting views is big business” (J. Davidson), pointing toward the massive revenue streams installations like this tend to generate, they rejected the Tulip as “pure razzmatazz, a thin-air pleasure dome” (J. Davidson) Comparing the Tulip to similar sites like Seattle’s Space Needle or Berlin’s TV Tower, where the “viewing platform was

secondary to their symbolic and logistical functions” (J. Davidson), Davidson particularly criticizes the Tulip for being nothing more than a superfluous piece of “Instagram architecture [...] a photogenic structure from which to shoot dramatic panoramas” (J. Davidson). Catherine Slessor of the *Architect’s Journal* is only slightly more forgiving when she writes that

the Tulip is simply a vertical version of a Victorian pleasure pier in all its huckstering, carnivalesque glory. In the same way that a pier thrusts out questingly to conquer the sea, so the Tulip shoots upwards to claim the air. Calculated to distract and disinhibit, the pier/Tulip choreographs its own world-within-a-world. At its end/tip lies an infantilizing fairground of attractions, set against unlimited horizons. (“The Tulip reframes”)

She concludes that the Tulip would likely share the fate of the pleasure piers. Reliant solely on novelty and fun, architecture like this is bound to deteriorate and fail once the hype recedes. Other commentators constructed analogies between the building’s ultimate rejection and the political climate at the time—that is, the unending debates around Brexit. Lacking in real architectural or social value, writes Juan Sebastián Pinto, the Tulip risked becoming “tokenized as a monument—as a representation for something *else*—whether it be Instagram culture, Brexit, or a disaster” (“Spoiled Fantasy”).

What is clear from this press review is sense of uneasiness with a building whose sole purpose is fun. The consensus seems to be that the Tulip lacked a sense of uniqueness—an iconic form that would justify its prominent position. On the following pages, I take a different stance. Instead of

dismissing high-rise observatories like the Tulip as architecture defined by a lack of definition, I suggest that, by incorporating and amalgamating other forms of entertainment, namely the cinema, the observatory is contemporary architecture par excellence. In order to reach this conclusion, however, it is necessary to first dig deeper into the discourse that haunts critical responses to the Tulip. In them, we see a conflict between modernist ideals and what has become known as a “post-critical” architecture.

3.5 ARCHITECTURE IN THE EXPERIENCE ECONOMY

“Criticality as the default mode of reflection, interpretation and evaluation of architecture” writes Ole W. Fischer in *Architectural Spaces between Critical Reading and Immersive Presence*, “was established in the US after 1968, under the impression of Continental European philosophic, linguistic and Neo-Marxist writings. Soon these theories turned into ‘canonical’ readings, rhetoric strategies and an established academic discipline [...]” (25). At some point, as Fischer writes, the obviousness of this critical stance was put into question. Practitioners like Herzog & de Meuron and the Office for Metropolitan Architecture, as well as theoreticians, most prominently Bob Somol and Sarah Whiting, argued for an architectural practice free from the “Regime of Criticality.” One figure often seen as championing this cause is Mies van der

Rohe. He embodied, for some, “a refusal of the terms of contemporary consumer society in the very surfaces of his built forms” (Baird). Some of the key components associated with critical architecture were opposition, negativity, and an avant-gardist resistance to a presumably “bad” consumerist culture.

Instead of a decisively critical practice that was synonymous with a “linguistic (over) determined architecture, legitimized by instruments of political correctness and institutionalized critique, that insists on a status as autonomous formal object or negative comment” (Fischer 26), the protagonists of the post-critical built architecture around the concept of the “projective.” Proposed by Sarah Whiting and Bob Somol in an issue of *perspecta* in 2002, it was a contested and at times inconsistent term from the very start.²² In a double riff on Marshall McLuhan’s “hot” and “cool” media and Dave Hackey’s comparative take on the acting styles of Robert De Niro and Robert Mitchum, Somol and Whiting state that

the formalist-critical project [associated with De Niro] is hot in its prioritization of definition, delineation and distinction (or medium specificity) [...] the hot resists through distinction, and connotes the overly difficult, belabored, worked, complicated, whereas ‘Mitchum architecture’ is cool, easy, and never looks like work; it’s about mood or the inhabitation of alternative realities (what if?, the virtual). (Somol & Whiting 77)

²² Both Baird and Fischer point out that given the diversity of architectural approaches within the group largely associated with the “Critical,” the idea of a unified stance is problematic in the first place.

Anna Klingmann continues this line of argumentation when she points out that

[c]urrently, we are in the middle of a profound paradigm shift, one that will render the stylistic debates of architectural discourse obsolete: a paradigm shift that will transform the practice of architecture and replace the paradigm of style in architecture with the paradigm of lived experience. (11)

Instead of insisting on the “modernist legacy of absolute truths and sincerity” (46) and the dogma of “good design,” practitioners must recognize that nowadays, architecture’s primary function is to “provoke aesthetic experiences” (47) that the public will like. Disregarding the maxim that form follows function, this architectural dogma is one that takes its essential cues from the marketing strategies of the experience economy, relying on a wide range of audio-visual effects “in order to turn the relationship between users and architecture into an interactive, sensual environment” (47). In other words, an approach that wants architecture to be fun and relatable resonates with the principles of the experience economy. Not unlike a playground (or the cinema), experience economy architecture needs to engage people emotionally and viscerally, encouraging a sense of affective involvement that will lead to memorable experiences.

One of the examples that both Klingmann and Ole Fischer²³ cite as exemplifying this new understanding of architecture is Diller + Scofidios’s *Blur*

²³ Fischer is in fact ambivalent about whether or not the Blur Building can be regarded as a departure from critical architecture, as its reception was very much guided by the intent of its

Building. The building was designed for the 2002 Swiss Expo, which was held in part at Yverdon-les-Bains, a small spa town on the banks of Lake Neuchâtel. Built not from steel, concrete or brick, the Blur Building generated an artificial cloud around an elevated platform by mechanically diffusing the waters of the lake. Depending on weather conditions, the dimensions of the cloud would continuously shift. People could either step into the mist, finding themselves surrounded and touched by it, or make their way up to the “Angel Platform” that allowed them to view the site from above.

Originally, the idea was that upon entering this “habitable medium” (Kosky 66) visitors would receive “brain-coats” that stored information from a personality test taken before entrance. The lights on the “brain-coat” would begin to flicker when its wearer came close to somebody who, according to the test, had a similar personality to them. Another scrapped feature was the Babble, an array of LED columns that would project messages into the cloud. These would then “rain” down on visitors like a kind of informational precipitation.

The flickering lights of the tower of Babble would record and display communications exchanged by anonymous, international visitors on shore, but for all intents and purposes these lights would come from nowhere, an

creators, who have given numerous interviews in which they offer “their authorized ‘reading’ of the work” (32). Such guidance, however, is in contrast with Somol and Whiting’s concept of the post-critical, which emphasizes reception and feeling instead of a reliance on architectural authority to “explain” architecture.

unattainable beyond, an unseen and incomprehensible source of flickering signs, glimpsed in the cloud but never fully deciphered. (73)

Both the “brain-coats” and the Babble aimed at creating an experience of random interconnectedness, of undirected chatter permeating a cloudy informational infrastructure. At night, Blur Building would closely resemble a cinema, as the mist served as a gaseous projection screen. An ambient soundtrack by Chris Marclay further contributed to the ethereal atmosphere.²⁴

For Klingmann, the Blur Building is a paradigmatic example of architecture based on the principles of the experience economy. Its emphasis on creating an inhabitable emotion is based not on a preconceived notion of good design, or an adherence to tradition, but instead embodies the idea that form should follow feeling. By doing so, it stretches the definition of building. It feels trivial to point out that by merely describing the technical setup of the *Blur*—its intricate system of tubes and vaporizers—one misses its central feature: the subjective experience it generates for its viewers. A materialist reading must fall short. The Tulip follows a similar philosophy of design. Shedding all pragmatic functions previously associated with high-rise architecture, its addition to London’s skyline is entirely focused on creating a fun time.

²⁴ People who visited the Blur Building tell me that entering this cloud was not particularly pleasurable, as the droplets of the Blur, due to condensation, tended to stick everywhere. Thus, the gaseous form of the Blur Building would disappear once one entered it.



Fig. 13: Aepli, Norbert: "Expo Yverdon." *July 17, 2002*. Photograph. Wikimedia Commons. <https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=796896>. Accessed January 22, 2020.

3.6 THE RISE OF THE EXPERIENCE ECONOMY

It is useful to place the discourse around the Tulip within a broader economic context. Recently, several scholars have commented on the emergence and widespread implementation of the so-called experience economy (cf. Pine & Gilmore 2011; Lonsway; Hannigan; Klingmann; Sundbo & Sørensen). Experiences are a relatively recent addition to the economy, and are different from both commodities, defined by Gilmore and Pine as "materials extracted from the natural world" (9) such as crude oil, diamonds, coffee beans or pig halves, as well as goods and services, such as iPhones or manicures. Pine and

Gilmore conclude that as the service economy reaches its peak while simultaneously facing major disruptions like automatization, a “new economy has arisen to increase revenues and create new jobs, one based on a distinct kind of economic output” (17). And this is the experience economy. “Whereas commodities are fungible, goods tangible, and services intangible,” write Pine and Gilmore, “experiences are *memorable*” (17). Following this logic, companies function as “experience stagers” whose product is the memory they create for the customers. Disneyworld is a prime example of this: “Most parents do not take their kids to Walt Disney World only for the venue itself but rather to make the shared experience part of everyday family conversations for months, or years, afterward” (18).

Concomitant with the intangible nature of these experiential goods is a focus on sensory experience. One of the examples that Gilmore and Pine give is that of a gumball machine: the product is not so much the gumball itself, but the experience of watching it make its way down the spiral inside the machine until it reaches the hands of the customer, “clickety-clacketing as it goes” (27).

Another component of the experience economy is the relentless staging of goods and services whose purpose is “to shift the attention from the underlying goods (and supporting services) to an experience wrapped around these traditional offerings, forestalling commoditization and increasing sales of the goods” (26). Companies like Lego, Heineken, Apple or Volkswagen all engage in an intricate staging of their products, be it in the form of theme parks

or factory tours, or by offering a carefully designed pick-up experience. “By adding theme parks, museums, and leisure venues to their car factories,” writes Anna Klingmann in *Brandscapes*, “automobile companies are trying to entice customers into taking a more interactive role in the production process of the merchandise” (30). Gilmore and Pine end their introduction to the experience economy with a word of caution and a call to action:

The growth of both the Industrial Economy and the Service Economy brought with it a proliferation of offerings that did not exist before imaginative companies invented and developed them. That’s also how the Experience Economy will grow [...] Those business that relegate themselves to the diminishing world of goods and services will be rendered irrelevant. To avoid this fate, you must learn to stage a rich, compelling experience. (39)

Whereas most of the authors I have cited here refer to private companies, the paradigms of the experience economy appear elsewhere as well. The observation deck in that regard can be seen as an architecture that engages in *staging* the city as one would stage a car or a piece of gum. As I will show in next section the city appears no longer as a lived reality but as an element within the commercializing logic of the touristic sector.

3.7 STAGING THE CITY

By now, the experience economy has expanded far beyond traditional markets. As Sundbo and Sørensen point out, “we are witnessing a large-scale industrialization of the experience economy” (9). What they describe is an expansion of the economic combat zone with cities figuring as the central battlegrounds. Driven by fierce competition, megacities such as New York, Los Angeles, London, Berlin, Paris, Tokyo, Dubai, Shanghai and many others are tasked with the development of ever more spectacular urban attractions in an effort to secure a foothold in the global tourism market, and to attract residents and investors alike. Svabo et al. argue that

[t]owns, cities and municipalities, challenged by population decrease and lack of commercial production, look to the ‘experience economy’ for revenue and potential attraction of citizens and visitors. The reinvention, rebuilding and rebranding of places [...] has become a (perceived) necessity in culturally driven urban and regional development [...] cities and regions compete with one another to attract tourists and they are evaluated for their ‘experiential qualities as tourist destinations and as interesting places to live, work and locate business. (310)

With reference to Anna Klingmann (2010), Svabo et al. point out that in the wake of the experience economy, the function of architecture is undergoing a substantial shift: “It is no longer the formal design of a building that determines its quality but rather its powers of affecting and engaging users,

emotionally, bodily and mentally” (312). Large scale re-development projects such as the Cultural Mile and proposals like the Tulip can then be understood as an effort to formulate a unique selling proposition, a response to the implicit demands placed on architecture in the experience economy.

For architecture to be recognized, it has to be aesthetically distinctive, but it must also elicit relevant emotional experiences at different points of contact with its users, by creating an architectural experience that is felt, as well as seen. For architecture in the experience economy, the relative success of a design lies in the sensation a customer derives from it—in the enjoyment it offers and resulting pleasure it evokes. (Klingmann 19)

Just as it is not enough for companies to simply offer goods and services, municipalities around the world can no longer rely on historical heritage, good infrastructure or low taxes to attract visitors, business and residents. Instead, cities are asked to act more like brands in a competitive marketplace, with an emphasis on creating a strong identity in order to differentiate themselves from their global competitors. Signature projects like the Tulip are thus marketed on the idea that by providing a unique point of view on the city, they might in turn make the city itself more visible in the global marketplace. An exceptionally successful (and much-cited) implementation of this approach is Frank Gehry’s Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao, which more or less single-handedly “changed the entire city from a declining industrial port into a flourishing tourist destination” (Klingmann 238). In the case of Bilbao, the museum managed not only to draw massive amounts of visitors to the port

town, but ended up substantially changing its identity. Eventually both city and museum merged into one as “Gehry’s Guggenheim building has become so successful as an icon that it became synonymous with the newborn identity of the city, and has become known simply as ‘the Bilbao.’”(241).

3.8 THE DISNEYFICATION OF THE INNER CITY

It is noteworthy that in both the city of London’s plans as well as in the proposals that describe the Tulip as the logical continuation of a transformation already underway, the inner city is primarily referenced as a place that one *visits* as opposed to a site of habitation or labor. The particular wording signals a rebranding of the inner city as an urban entertainment destination. This rebranding in turn follows a larger trend that some scholars refer to as “Disneyfication” (Roost). In other words, the development of urban areas according to principles derived from theme parks, with an emphasis on creating value through entertainment and tourism instead of providing rentable space for housing or offices. A key aspect of Disneyfication is the development of a consistent theme along which individual areas are designed. Within Disneyland, every element contributes to the sense of a larger narrative, a story that is unfolding as visitors move through the park. The rides, the

parades, the gift shop—everything happens within a larger choreography designed to be pleasant and consumable.

“Architecture in the Disney view,” writes Anna Klingmann, “became a catalyst that facilitated a harmonious, visually persuasive, and psychologically reassuring consumer experience” (75). The result of relentless theming is a space that is completely devoid of the internal contradictions and general dissonance of ordinary city life, as well as any incentive on behalf of the inhabitants to become actively involved in shaping the narrative. As Klingmann points out, the experience created is willfully bland, constructed as it is around a presumed lowest common denominator. The end result then caters perfectly to its presumed audience: white suburban middle-class families:

This sense of the vaguely familiar and the ordinary is reinforced by the simplistic codification of the individual themes, which more frequently than not are expressed in predetermined clichés and referential designs that celebrate a powerful mix of family virtue, nostalgia, optimism, and sentimentality—values that are readily understood and appreciated by the visitors who enter the parks. (76)

As a visitor you are invited to passively inhabit this perfect world for a set amount of time, a world whose entire purpose is for you to be comfortable, which demands money and attention and in return makes you feel both safe and thoroughly entertained.

The city of London’s plans to transform parts of the inner city into the Culture Mile presumably aim to create a slightly more diverse environment

than Disneyland. However, the importance of establishing a consistent theme—i.e. the celebration of imagined encounters between artists, creative industries, museums, tourism and business—is a sign that urban developers and city officials are indeed learning from Disneyland. What is celebrated in London might be different from Disneyland in terms of specific values, but the desire to integrate a heterogeneous, potentially contradictory assemblage of people, architecture and institutions into a coherent overall narrative is somewhat transparent vis-à-vis its ideological heritage. That is, London differs from Disneyland in terms of content not strategy. The heads behind the Tulip, with its blend of glass slides, soap-bubble gondolas, safe thrills and leisurely learning, do have a point when they write that their proposal fits snugly with the City’s vision of “profit-oriented spectacles of history, culture, and tradition” (Klingmann 77).

The organization of “real” cities according to the principles of Disneyworld provides a new and highly profitable area of business for media firms. By entering into public-private partnership, companies can design entire areas at once, such as Times Square in New York which, with the Walt Disney Corporation acting as the main developer,²⁵ underwent a substantial transformation in the 1990s. Regarded as a shoddy district largely defined by adult movie theaters, prostitution and the urban homeless in the 1980s, Times

²⁵ According to Roost, Disney demanded a low-interest loan of \$26 million as a condition for them acting as Times Square’s primary developer.

Square is now a tightly controlled, family-friendly and distinctly global *brandscape* (83). It harvests cultural heritage in order to create positive emotions under the auspices of the Disney corporation (Roost 35f.). For Klingmann, Times Square represents the “fusion of two essentially very different myths” (84). On the one hand, there is the unique history of the district; and on the other, there is the catalog of values, allegories and branded myths that Disney stands for. The result is a “holistically themed brand experience for the consumer” (84).

As Roost writes, the transformation of Times Square was accompanied by a zero-tolerance policy towards any kind of sex-work in the district. This strategy was legislatively enforced by the so-called “adult entertainment regulations” which effectively banned sex shops, peep shows and the like within a certain radius of Times Square. Eventually, the partnership between Disney and then mayor Rudolph Giuliani resulted in a thoroughly homogenized and heavily policed district, where anything that might detract from the experience, i.e. poverty, crime or any of the contradictions that are commonly associated with city life, is strikingly absent.

It would be fairly easy to dismiss Disneyfication as a perversion of the urban experience, and to lament this crass departure from the architectural canon. However, as Klingmann notes, Disneyland is apparently doing *something* right, otherwise it would not be so popular. For Klingmann, Disneyland provides a response, albeit a crude one, to the desire for a sense of

belonging and community and spaces that would do this desire justice. She thus urges architects and city planners to take seriously “people’s longing for a sense of security and the enrichment of architecture and cities with social experience” (80). The underlying script of Disneyland might be problematic, but the idea of scripting places as such bears some potential. What Klingmann then suggests is the production of places that mimic the techniques of Disneyland without adopting its ideology: “[P]eople’s needs for active engagement, social inclusion, and self-realization within the urban realm must be recognized,” she writes, “while open strategies of urban planning must be provided that are not intent on editing the undisciplined diversity of the social and cultural fabric [...]” (80f.). Some of the unease that results from trying to harmonize the rhetoric of the experience economy with a sense of civic virtue can also be detected in the negotiations between foster+partners and the City of London.

In a report that the mayoral office issued to explain why it rejected the Tulip, the main criticism concerned the lack of public space around its base, its inherent inaccessibility, and the regime of visibility it would inject into the cityscape. As a result of its structure, the entrance pavilion would present not much more than a lift lobby, thus not satisfying the demand for public space. The panel also voiced concerns that the material used in the shaft and the design of the platform would lead to a one-sided distribution of visibility,

where the people inside the Tulip would enjoy great visibility of the city, while the building would deflect the gaze from street level:

The tower shaft in textured concrete is a ‘mute’ architectural element. The viewing platform levels have been designed to maximise view out, with extensive glazing. A potentially unintended consequence of this design is to create the appearance of a surveillance tower, particularly in views from Whitechapel Road. Overall panel members felt that whilst the building may be a successful response to the functions of its brief—this has not resulted in the world class architecture that would be required to justify its prominence. (“London Review Panel”)

The stance taken by the panel is noteworthy: a building that is concerned with enhancing the view for everyone, might in fact only do so for its paying customers. Further, the allegation that The Tulip resembles a giant surveillance tower reveals an uneasiness vis-à-vis its intended stratification of visibility. Another concern is that due to its prominence and height, The Tulip would draw attention away from the Tower of London, a crucial infringement of the city’s image (“London Review Panel”).

The panel also rejects the argument that the Tulip would add social value through its Classroom in the Sky on the basis that everyone else would need to pay for access—a fact that negates any ambition it has to be a socially valuable building (“London Review Panel”). It is obvious that the review panel is guided by a set of values that is not applicable to The Tulip. What the former conjures up is a model of the city where social life is incommensurable with having to pay for access. In the eyes of the panel, the experience of the city is a

public good and not a commodity to be cultivated by private actors such as the Safra Group. In comparison to Anna Klingmann's enthusiasm, this view appears almost anachronistic.

As I will show in the next chapter, one can trace the point in time where this shift in perception took place back to New York at the end of the 1960s. Struggling with crime, poverty and a mounting fiscal deficit, the city responded with an unprecedented re-invention of itself. Once economically and socially based on a blue-collar workforce, strong unions and small scale manufacturing, the city was transformed into a center for finance, real estate, insurance and last but not least, tourism. As I will show, the structure that is most emblematic of this re-invention is the observation deck at the top of the North Tower of the World Trade Center. It is here, where the city, perhaps for the first time, is conceptualized as a commodity instead of a place that belongs to all.

4. PARA-MANHATTAN

4.1 FEAR CITY

One minute I was just the everyday me... mildly optimistic, sedately enthusiastic, benignly paranoid, wholesomely cynical. And then zonk! Epiphany. A revelation. Suddenly I knew—absolutely *knew*—New York would survive. (Greene)

Yet I can't help feeling like an alien here, as though I've crossed from real New York, with all its jangling mess, into a movie studio's back-lot version. Everything is too clean, too flat, too art-directed. This para-Manhattan, raised on a platform and tethered to the real thing by one subway line, has no history, no holdover greasy spoons, no pockets of blight or resident eccentrics—no memories at all. (Davidson)

In 1976, New York was experiencing a fiscal crisis so severe that for a while it seemed like it would never recover. The city's residents were leaving, and entire districts fell into disrepair. For a moment its fate, and the idea of "confident liberalism" (Phillips-Fein 24) for which it stood, seemed totally unclear. The first quote above marks a distinct moment of crisis in New York's more recent history. In it, restaurant critic Gael Greene's shares his reaction upon first entering Windows on the World, the restaurant on the 107th floor of

the freshly opened North Tower of the World Trade Center. On top of the South Tower, a public observation deck had also just opened. Although Greene was certain that New York would survive, the city's officials at the time were not.

The second quote belongs to Justin Davidson, architectural critic at New York Magazine, who expresses mixed feelings over New York's most recent real estate development project. The Hudson Yards, a 25 billion dollar mixed-use district at the western edge of midtown Manhattan features, among other amenities, a triangular shaped observation deck called The Edge, protruding from the 100th floor like a giant glass wedge. It was opened in 2019, and critics have received it with bewilderment and confusion. For many, Hudson Yards, one of the most expensive private development projects, is the last nail in the coffin of the New York that once was.

These two quotes are entangled with questions of urban identity: in the first, the city is spoken of like a moribund patient, bankrupt and sick; and in the second, the city appears as a ghostly revenant, a "para-Manhattan," devoid of identity and a soul. As such they form a sort of temporal bracket which will allow me to situate my case study in the broader discursive history of New York.

On the following pages, I argue that Top of the World, the observatory on top of the South Tower of the World Trade Center, introduced a new

paradigm of urban experience that shaped urban planning far beyond its own lifespan. As I will argue, it was built during a period in which New York underwent substantial transformation. This was portrayed as a necessary move in the wake of ongoing de-industrialization, and signaled the end of an era of relatively generous municipal spending and a somewhat stable social safety net. It was replaced by what some authors have referred to as the “entrepreneurial city” (Hall & Hubbard). The bewilderment that Justin Davidson expresses when being shown around the new Hudson Yards district can thus be read as a belated reaction to a process of urban branding²⁶ that began decades ago. If Hudson Yards can be seen not as the culmination of this development but at least as its most recent expression, Top of the World represents its early moments. The ambition of its designers was to create an image of New York City as a flourishing and thriving metropolis at a time when it was quite the opposite. This strategy aimed to acclimatize the public to the re-structuring of the city in general, and the building of the World Trade Center (WTC) in particular—a structure that, perhaps uniquely so, was symbolic of said re-structuring. While from the 1960s onward New York was increasingly subject to the interests of an elite class of speculative real-estate developers, Top of the World sought to transform the city into an audiovisual spectacle—

²⁶ I am following Julian Brash’s definition of urban branding as the “development of a desired set of images and meanings [...] for the city, which can then guide efforts to, first, influence the perceptions of the city held by key individuals and groups—businesses, tourists, potential residents, actual residents and other ‘target markets’—who might invest in, move to, or otherwise contribute to the city’s well-being and, second, to reshape the city itself to bring it more in line with the brand” (102).

one that was readymade for visual consumption and a brand with which one would want to identify.

In support of my argument, I have consulted the archival records of Warren Platner, who served as the WTC's interior designer and as such was responsible for the design of the Top of the World. What this material shows is that the designers of the observation deck sought to manufacture a hyperreal version of New York City, a para-Manhattan inhabited by consumers instead of citizens. If the agenda was to fabricate a simulation of urban experience, the moving image was the tool with which to do so. As I will demonstrate, the designers sought to utilize cinematic technologies on a wide scale. Top of the World can therefore not only be regarded as a symptomatic case of the restructuring of New York's economy, but a prime example of how architecture at the time responded to and made use of a variety of media formats.

4.2 WELCOME TO FEAR CITY

"Manhattan is a counter-Paris," writes Rem Koolhaas in 1978, five years after the building of the World Trade Center was finished, "an anti-London" (20). He also notes that "[i]f Manhattan is still in search of a theory, then this theory, once identified should yield a formula for an architecture that is at once ambitious *and* popular" (10). For Koolhaas, the outlines of this theory are pre-formulated in its grid plan, i.e. the fragmentation of Manhattan into 2028

blocks at the beginning of the 19th century, in order to make the buying and selling of land easier. The grid as it was devised in 1807 is an unprecedented combination of urban planning and speculative fortune telling: “the land it divides, unoccupied; the population it describes, conjectural; the building it locates, phantoms; the activities it frames, nonexistent” (19). The grid, according to Rosalind Krauss, is a “way of abrogating the claims of natural objects to have an order particular to themselves” (50). It is a map that precedes the territory it describes. New York, then, in what Koolhaas calls a retroactive manifesto, is a city modeled by the forces of the real estate economy and the hallucinatory dreamlands of Coney Island, which he describes as the “incubator for Manhattan’s incipient themes and infant mythology” (30).

Other than the forces of commerce, speculation and entertainment, 1960s and 70s New York represented “high finance and Wall Street, but also [...] a certain robust strain of democratic politics: a demonstration of citizenship bound up with social as well as political rights” (Phillips-Fein 26). As Phillips-Fein writes, New York offered its inhabitants a wide array of public services, ranging from municipality-run clinics to public parks and housing, community colleges, affordable public transit as well as “bargain tickets on theater, opera, symphony, and ballet” (26). After World War II, a large part of the city’s laborforce consisted of blue-collar workers, many of which organized

themselves into trade unions, forming a working-class that “was socially visible and politically strong” (30). From today’s neoliberal viewpoint, Phillips-Fein’s description of New York up until the 1970s sounds like a tale from another time: a city largely run by its citizens for its citizens, rich in a cultural life that was accessible through subsidized tickets, and which provided an intriguing alternative to suburbanization and the increasing privatization of life. And then it all came down. Mirroring a downturn in the US economy as a whole—hit as it was by a combination of rising unemployment, economic stagnation and rapid inflation (stagflation)—New York’s economic base was quickly deteriorating. This process was exacerbated by a deliberate dismantling of the traditional sectors of the economy in favor of finance, real estate and insurance.

The small manufacturers that had once populated downtown Manhattan and the outer boroughs were slowly departing the city, seeking cheaper land and a more tractable, nonunion workforce in the suburbs, the South, and overseas [...] By 1966, fewer than half the manufacturing jobs in the New York metropolitan region were in the city itself. This loss of jobs was most pronounced in those industries where employment had once been strongest, such as apparel and garment production, electrical manufacturing, and printing and publishing. (33)

After Richard Nixon’s election in 1968, federal funding dried up, which exacerbated the crumbling of New York’s economic base. Previously, as Phillips-Fein writes, federal grants were specifically administered in order to

help cities to tackle urban poverty (39). However, the Nixon administration changed the terms, and federal money was to be spent exclusively on fighting crime. Putting an end to what he had called an “era of permissiveness,” Nixon wanted to instill a sense of self-reliance into a populace which he saw as having been pampered and indulged for too long (“President Pledges”).

This policy largely continued under the succeeding administration of Gerald Ford. In 1975, New York petitioned for a federal bailout, which was swiftly declined. This is hardly surprising when one realizes who had the President’s ear at the time:

[...] President Ford and his closest advisors—a circle that included his chief of staff, Donald Rumsfeld, and the chairman of his Council of Economic Advisers, Alan Greenspan, strongly opposed federal help for New York. They were convinced that the city has brought its problems on itself, through heedless, profligate spending. Bankruptcy was thus just a punishment for its sins. (Phillips-Fein 10)

According to the Ford administration, New York’s demise was the end result of public overspending and misguided social policy. However, as Robert Fitch points out in *The Assassination of New York*, the city’s financial calamities had more to do with a regime of urban planning that had sought to restructure the economy away from manufacturing and toward the FIRE-industries (Finance, Insurance and Real Estate). This restructuring went hand-in-hand with the Central Business District’s (CBD) continued expansion: “[O]ver the last three

generations,” Fitch wrote in 1993, “the city has had a real estate strategy—expand the CBD/shrink manufacturing—which it has presented as a jobs strategy” (Fitch 49). This strategy, often declared inevitable as a result of increasing global competition, mainly served a class of real estate developers who could expect to profit from such a restructuring. Indeed, it was they who would fill the gap left by the manufacturing sectors by redeveloping the land, i.e. by speculating on an expected increase in value. As Julian Brash emphasizes in his history of what he calls “Bloomberg’s New York,”²⁷ the

influence, if not dominance, of the city’s real estate elite has been endemic to modern New York City [...] Its most prominent and powerful members are real estate developers, including the city’s well-established and close-knit real estate families, and more recently national and global real estate corporations. However, it also includes urban planners, urban experts, professionals, and managers who staff the governmental, quasi-governmental, and private organizations that create the legal, political, ideological, and physical conditions for the profitable development of the city’s built environment. (26)²⁸

For Fitch, the economic crisis of the 1970s thus only provided a convenient pretense for the slashing of subsidies and the replacement of the manufacturing sector that had already begun. Initiatives like Downtown Lower

²⁷ After having made a fortune with a company specializing, among other things, in financial software, Michael Bloomberg served as New York’s mayor from 2002 to 2013. For Brash, he exemplifies a philosophy of “neoliberal and entrepreneurial urban governance” (2).

²⁸ It should not go unmentioned that at the time of writing, a descendant of said class is the President of the United States.

Manhattan Association (DLMA), which, according to Fitch, represented “the Dream Team of U.S. Finance Capital” (Fitch 132), had long sought to completely de-industrialize large parts of Manhattan. This effort is reflected in a number of re-zonings that took place in the early 1960s, effectively squeezing the manufacturing sector out of the city:

The 1961 Zoning Act narrowed the ring on manufacturing all over the city, but Manhattan suffered the most. Manufacturing was made illegal on Manhattan’s East river side. The Hudson river side was initially affected much less. This was in accordance with zoning recommendations in the 1958 DLMA plan which initially foresaw the location of the World Trade Center on the *East river*—where, coincidentally, the project would add value to the Chase Manhattan Bank. (135)

The inevitable job loss in the manufacturing sector, or so the DLMA argued, would be offset by fantastic growth in the FIRE sector. Yet, as Fitch contends, this narrative was just a pretense. The real goal of initiatives such as the DLMA was to profit from speculating on the demand in office space that its planning created. In 1969, the DLMA published its tenth annual report, detailing its vision of a city having successfully undergone the process of de-industrialization. Fitch’s assessment of the report is damning:

The tenth annual report of the DLMA was by far the most hypertrophic and self-congratulatory yet produced, bordering almost on delirium. Most of its 23 pages were just filled with pictures of office buildings being erected: a kind of real estate porn. The rest was devoted to exaggerated claims of

downtown employment growth. All this of course, just before the city's collapse. (139)

As Fitch points out, the fantastical projections of job growth were based upon a simple formula, as the "totals were calculated by simply taking the total amount of existing office space, adding the amount planned, and dividing by a fixed amount per worker" (139f.). What the report did not take into account, however, was the possibility that the "buildings might not fill up" (140).

When the crisis caused by the cultivation of an economy entirely reliant on renting out office spaces to employees of the FIRE-sector materialized, it was more convenient to blame it on misguided public spending policy. City-owned hospitals and a tuition-free public university system were contrary to the free-market principles to which the Ford Administration, in particular Alan Greenspan, subscribed. New York's reputation as a city whose suspect values of urban liberalism were fueled by profligate municipal spending did not help. "The federal government should not give a penny in bailout funds that allowed New Yorkers to continue these indulgences" writes Kim Philipps-Fein, paraphrasing a speech that Gerald Ford held in front of the National Press Club. Ford continues: "Why should other Americans support advantages in New York that they have not been able to afford for their own communities?" (Philipps-Fein 10).

This indifferent response from the nation's leadership made it apparent that the model for which New York once stood was collapsing. For the Ford Administration, a city that could not support itself through free-market principles was not worth saving in the first place. Julian Brash comes to a similar conclusion when he states that by the mid-1970s

[t]here was a sense (mostly among whites) that an overly generous and permissive liberal state had led to urban 'disorder' and that retrenchment was required [...] on the national level, ascendant neoliberals and conservatives saw in the fiscal crisis an opportunity to use New York City as an object lesson by implementing such retrenchment in the symbolic capital of postwar urban liberalism. (28)

Accordingly, as Phillips-Fein describes, New York City in the early 1970s must have felt like a dreary and chaotic place, which had already been written off. There was an upward trend in crime rates throughout the city, coupled with news of widespread disinvestment:

newspapers were filled with reports of horrific crimes: a seven year-old-girl raped on the way home from a candy store, a young woman killed with an ax. [...] throughout all this, the city was continuing to lose jobs at least as rapidly as it had lost them in the previous few years, if not more so. In February 1974 it had 22,000 fewer jobs than a year before, and by April the gap was 38,000. By the end of 1974 the city's unemployment rate stood at 7 percent. (82)

Large parts of the city fell into disrepair. In 1975, a strange leaflet began to appear at airports. Presenting itself as a survival guide, “WELCOME TO FEAR CITY” was produced in an act of joint protest by the city’s Police and Fire departments. The four-page brochure, facsimiles of which can easily be found on the Internet, featured a frontispiece adorned with the figure of a hooded skull and contained a series of high-pitched warnings. It quoted rising numbers in burglary, larceny and aggravated assault and attributed this to the budget cuts of Abraham Beame, then mayor of New York. By the time you read this,” the leaflet said, “the number of public safety personnel available to protect residents and visitors may already have been still further reduced. Under those circumstances, the best advice we can give you is this: Until things change, stay away from New York City if you possibly can” (“Welcome to Fear City”). The leaflet paints a gloomy picture of New York City, warning that the Midtown Streets would be largely deserted after 7.30 pm. It also advised visitors to either stay indoors, or, if unavoidable, traverse the city only by cab. It advised staying in Manhattan, as, according to the leaflet, the South Bronx was subject to uncontrolled fires laid by arsonists. Everyone who ventured beyond midtown did so at their own risk, and could not rely on emergency personnel for safety (“Welcome to Fear City”).

The leaflet makes it sound as if New York City in the mid-seventies was a battleground. And the punitive measures implemented by the Ford

Administration solidified the misleading assumption that it was the city's social agenda, not a restructuring from above, that caused its descent into anarchy. As Julian Brash points out, the calamitous financial situation that the city found itself in created an ideal background for a substantial reformulation of who would govern the city and what such government would look like (30). As I will show in the following pages, this reworking of the city's governance coincided with a shift in cultural practices. And it is in the observation deck that the confluence of both the socio-political and the cultural restructuring of New York City expresses itself most dramatically. *Top of the World*, in this sense, functions like a monument and a focal point for a set of political and cultural axioms that continue to shape the city today.

4.3 CHANGES IN FILM CULTURE

As Lawrence Webb points out in *The Cinema of Urban Crisis*, filmic representation of New York City at the end of the 1960s and throughout the 1970s depicted the city in a similar manner:

In the Lindsay era (1966-1973), especially from 1968-1969, New York became represented as an increasingly dangerous and crisis-ridden place [...] Under the Abraham Beame administration (1974-1977), arguably the most troubled and directionless years of the decade, the city's cinematic image became even more dystopian and paranoid. The key films here are the vigilante fantasies of *Death Wish* (1974) and (more complexly) *Taxi Driver* (1976). (87)

As Webb describes, there is a noticeable shift in representations of city life at the end of the 1970s, with brooding dystopias such as *Taxi Driver* being replaced by much more celebratory accounts like Woody Allen's *Manhattan* (87). At the beginning of the 1980s, he writes, the crisis was no longer depicted via the rhetoric of social commentary but, with films like *Escape from New York* (1981), was pushed "into the realm of exploitation and fantasy" (87). Another important point that Webb makes is that the filmic depictions of a city in crisis, even though they may appear to be largely oppositional in nature "did not necessarily work against the city's managerial and financial elite, but rather counterintuitively helped to legitimate New York's restructuring after the crisis of 1975 by presenting the city as a problem to be solved" (76). As I will show in my reading of the Top of the World observation deck, this idea of New York as a problem that needs to be solved comes up time and again. At first, however, it is necessary to point out that the changes in film culture happened not only at the level of representation but, perhaps more importantly, at an institutional level.

During the same timespan that Webb focuses on, definitions of film and cinema and the way in which they relate to society are being continually stretched. For example, in "Expanded Cinema" Gene Youngblood writes that:

[w]hen we say expanded cinema we actually mean expanded consciousness. Expanded cinema does not mean computer films, video

phosphors, atomic light, or special projections. Expanded cinema isn't a movie at all: like life it's a process of becoming, man's ongoing historical drive to manifest his consciousness outside of his mind, in front of his eyes. One no longer can specialize in a single discipline and hope truthfully to express a clear picture of its relationships in the environment. This is especially true in the case of the intermedia network of cinema and television, which now functions as nothing less than the nervous system of mankind. (41)

Film, by the 1960s, had already escaped the confines of the cinema, serving a wide variety of functions beyond entertainment. As Haidee Wasson points out, the cultural status of moving images had been gradually shifting from at least the 1930s onwards. Throughout much of the first half of the 20th century, Wasson writes, not only artists but also Hollywood Studios and industry officials continually sought to open new markets for moving images, insisting on the educational benefits that could be derived from film (*Museum Movies* 12). This effort "to transform cinema from its status as a passing and mass entertainment to an edifying and educational activity" (18) involved not only the MoMA Film Library curators, but influenced those professionals who sought to use moving images to raise awareness of complex social issues or convey a corporate image.

One site where a different kind of film culture outside of the cinema had emerged was the 1939 World's Fair. Titled *The World of Tomorrow*, the fair

[...] was a textured and diversified event with no shortage of creative applications for portable film projection technology. Such projectors and screens animated a range of things and spaces, from bottles of antacid to panoramic colourscapes. They served multiple functions, from supplying rolling didactic text to directing pedestrian traffic. (“The Other Small Screen” 83)

Nine years prior, foregoing standard 35mm projectors, the World’s Fair in Chicago projected 16mm film on a variety of screens using smaller devices (85). The companies that presented themselves at the World of Tomorrow went a step further, offering attractions that employed cinematic technologies to generate experiences of constant motion. Rides like General Motors’ *Futurama*, where spectators were moved across an artificial future landscape on specially designed “sound chairs,” or Kodak’s *World of Color*, that featured “eleven screens, mounted side-by-side on a curved wall” (89) on which a complicated slide show consisting of still and moving images was projected, present examples of a rapidly expanding cinematic universe.

Other than the consumerist bonanza that was the World’s Fair, the increasing miniaturization and mobilization of audio-visual devices had an effect on museum exhibitions as well. As early as the turn of the 20th century, writes Alison Griffiths, instructive media had been finding their way into museums. She describes how in 1904 one Dr. Ant Fritsch suggested in a museum pamphlet placing a coin-operated phonograph next to exhibits. When a coin was dropped into the apparatus, it would provide contextual information

very much like a contemporary audio-guide (Griffiths). However, such novel methods were not always met with approval. In opposition to the enthusiasm that accompanied new technologies such as the phonograph, Griffiths points out how such enthusiasm was usually accompanied by “an undertone of disapproval [...] a sense, perhaps, that in making exhibits more accessible to the public, curators risked compromising or oversimplifying scientific ideas” (236).

This tension between wanting to make collections accessible and entertaining while maintaining scientific standards continued in the 1920s, when moving images began to make an appearance in the museum space. In 1925, as Griffiths describes, the Imperial War Museum in London incorporated what would later be known as the *Dramagraph* into its exhibitions. The *Dramagraph* was “a projector housed inside a wooden cabinet with a small screen” (243) which rotated a strip of 16mm film once a coin was inserted. After a viewing—with subjects as exciting as battleships in action—the machine would reset automatically, without any need to manually rewind the film inside. Griffiths writes that despite the obvious appeal of the *Dramagraph*, institutions such as the American Museum of Natural History (AMNH) in New York City were slow to invest in the technology, citing both operational problems and budgetary concerns (245). Over time, however, apparatuses similar to the *Dramagraph* popped up elsewhere, with the interactive nature of the device (throwing in a coin and flipping a button) and its sheer spectacular

appeal proving irresistible. To illustrate the growing acceptance of moving images among exhibition-makers and the gradual normalization of this new technology in the museum, Griffiths cites a 1934 survey published in the *Museums Journal*. This survey asked curators about their experiences with specific setups of moving images, their respective technical reliability, and the selection of films. Griffiths notes that the selection of films reported by exhibition-makers—often thrilling accounts of perilous journeys around the globe with a special focus on the Antarctic expeditions of Robert Falcon Scott and Ernest Shackleton—is similar to the kind of content found at large science museums at the beginning of the 21st century. Clearly, despite some occasional skepticism, moving images in the museum had come to stay. Their capacity to provide both a captivating audiovisual stimulus to museumgoers as well as convey complex information reached “a high degree of intellectual and logistical maturity” (248) by the end of the 1930s. This is a statement that resonates well with Wasson’s observations.

By the end of the 1960s, moving images had become integral parts of exhibition design, contributing towards the establishment of leisurely learning environments. As Griffiths points out, such environments, where visitors do not merely engage with individual exhibits but become psychically invested in an alternative space have “been something of a holy grail for museum curators” (250). His case in point is *Can Man Survive*, a 1969 exhibition that celebrated the American Museum of Natural History’s 100-year-anniversary. Its

eschatological focus on topics like sustainability and man's impact on the environment was clearly an expression of the zeitgeist.

The entire exhibition took place within a unique structure called a Takanak Truss,²⁹ a “computer designed-metal frame” (252) that handled architectural forces in a unique way. After entering the exhibition via a “dimly-lighted ramp” the visitors were first greeted by an array of screens on which a four-minute film was projected (254). The film introduced the exhibition's theme by showing a sequence of undisturbed and unpopulated land- and seascapes followed by a variety of earthly biomes connoting “harmony, diversity, stability, warmth, and incredible beauty” (254). Several arrays of moving images followed, some set-up in more unusual ways like a “rear-projection loop film [...] playing on a hemispherical screen” (254). The exhibition moved along a thematic path broken down into four sections: serene, untrammelled wilderness, scientific advances in medicine, and then more grimly portrayed subjects like overpopulation and world hunger. As Griffiths describes, the exhibition was

Addressing global poverty through such heartwrenching images as a Chilean boy sucking a gasoline-soaked rag and a Biafran child looking for cockroaches [...] the overall effect of the exhibit planners were after in this third section is ‘unease’ [...] loop films showing the rise of bacteria, river

²⁹ I am not sure if Griffith's “Takanak Truss” is actually a typographical error which was meant to reference “Tanaka Truss,” a Japanese civil engineer.

pollution, and various abuses of the environment from automobile junkyards, burned-out cars, overflowing garbage cans. (256)

Clearly, the exhibition's objective was to drive home its core message: without proper environmental guidance and care, the human species was doomed to extinction. In the last section, visitors entered a Virtual Image Sphere that bombarded them with fast-paced snippets of material they had seen previously. This was an effort to permanently engrain in their consciousness the exhibition's agenda. In addition to the visual onslaught, as Griffiths points out, *Can Man Survive* also tried to stimulate the other senses: the museum's air conditioning, for example, was "deliberately turned down to create a more claustrophobic, stifling oppressive atmosphere" (257). In contrast to the *Dramagraph*, where moving images were simply an addition to an otherwise object-oriented exhibition design, the designers of *Can Man Survive* translated the concept of environmentalism into exhibition architecture. Various configurations of moving images realized a multi-sensory experience that, in Griffiths words, lay somewhere between "a funfair ghost train/ Hall of Mirrors and a *Star Trek* set" (258).

Simply by traversing this "configuration of space" (262), visitors could learn about the complex interplay between population growth and its effect on the environment—regardless of whether they made a conscious effort to do so. Receiving an education about environmental issues—or so seemed to have been the idea—was not a fringe benefit but an inevitable consequence of

visiting the exhibition. By addressing all the senses at once, *Can Man Survive* introduced a new didactic protocol into the museum, which until then had centered around solitary, contemplative exploration of neatly arranged display cases. Turning away from a more object-oriented style of exhibition design and toward the “flickering pseudo-materialities of the screen” (262), the late 1960s, then, saw the emergence of a new attitude toward the “possibilities of audiovisual media as conduits for knowledge” (263).

Artistic practices that sought to blur the line between audience and artist; curatorial strategies facilitating effortless learning through audiovisual media; a city grappling with bankruptcy, crime and despair. The combination of all of these factors set the stage for the World Trade Center’s observatory. Top of the World’s designers were acutely aware of museological trends. Tasked with the representation of an overwhelmingly complex system, i.e. New York City caught in a crisis, they conceived of an installation that combined the frenzied sensationalism of the world’s fair, the dense atmosphere of a happening, and the pedagogical ambition of the museum. Top of the World is also an example of the complicated relationship between moving images and built space as it sought to combine, as Sylvia Lavin puts it, “the real and durable with the imagined and fleeting” (26). In fact, one of the most contested points in the construction of the observation deck is to what extent moving images should play a role in its design. Warren Platner and Milton Glaser, the driving forces behind the observatory, wanted to use a wide variety

of audio-visual media in order to realize what could be called a retro-active mythopoeisis. In other words, the making of a myth in which New York appears as the vibrant, culturally diverse place that, during much of the 1970s, it failed to resemble in reality. Despite the financiers reducing the ambitious scope of Platner and Glaser's plans, the conceptual stages of the project displayed many of the qualities that would later come to be associated with the experience economy. It thus anticipated a moment in urban planning where cities were judged primarily on their ability to delight. The New York they envision also shares some similarities with how Julian Brash describes the way the city was later shaped by the entrepreneurial ambitions of Michael Bloomberg. Top of the World New York, then, already conceived of the city as a product—or an experienced ready to be sold.

4.4 STÄDTEMORDENDEN BAUWUT

In 1966, when construction of the Twin Towers began, the Empire State Building was still the tallest building of the world. The observation deck on its roof featured coin-operated binoculars with which to scan the landscape of Midtown Manhattan. As such, it could claim a monopoly on providing elevated views of the city to New York citizens and tourists alike. Despite featuring not much more than the binoculars, the observation deck proved to be a wildly successful tourist attraction. Indeed, as the building itself was constantly

struggling to find tenants, the observatory provided a substantial and continuous stream of revenue (Reis 96). The profitability of the Empire State Building's observatory is surely one of the reasons why the Port Authority of New York and New Jersey, which had been put in charge of the 280-million dollar World Trade Center project by New York governor Nelson Rockefeller, pushed the development of two observation decks at the top of the North Tower. The entire 107th floor, with a floor space of more than 4000 square meters, as well as the rooftop, were to be dedicated to this purpose.

Architect and interior designer Warren Platner was commissioned with designing this "acre in the sky" as well as the lavish restaurant planned for the South Tower. It is from his archives that much of what follows has been drawn. The story that the material tells is one of a highly ambitious project that is eventually reduced in scope. However, its immanent logic, as it is detailed in the letters, drawings, drafts and diagrams, survived.

Platner began his career in the 1950s working for modernist giants like Eero Saarinen and I.M. Pei, before opening his own studio in the mid-60s in New Haven, Connecticut.³⁰ He worked on numerous occasions with Joe Baum, who was appointed chief restaurateur of the Twin Towers. As such, Baum was responsible for Windows on the World, the South Tower's luxurious restaurant. It was Baum who hired Platner in 1986 to oversee the interior design of said

³⁰Today, Platner is perhaps most famous for the 1966 furniture collection he made for Knoll. This was a number of chairs and a dining table made from steel rods that were welded to a circular frame and topped off with a circular surface.

restaurant, as well as the observation deck. Quite some time after the observatory was already open to the public, Platner describes the project's significance in a press release:

Everyone goes to the observation decks, not just certain classes of people. Furthermore, this deck expects several million visitors per year. This is big business. It is not only business but it is prominently a city's public relations. Here the visitor has an overall view and some understanding; how he is treated here has a definite effect on how he feels about the whole city. ("Press Release")

From the outset, Platner's Top of the World would be an attraction for the masses that positively affected their view of New York (which was especially pertinent given the desolate state of the city at the time).³¹ The observatory, then, as Platner describes it, was a concession to a democratic ideal of public space. His assertion that *everyone* goes to the observatory points in that direction. However, what is more striking is that Platner does not see the contradiction underlying his statement: How open and democratically accessible can a space be that at the same time functions as *big business*? Platner was well aware, of course, that the observation deck was to function first and foremost as a moneymaking machine. In case he ever forgot, Guy Tozzoli, who was in charge of the entire World Trade Centre project, was quick to remind him. In a letter from November 29, 1973, around the time Top of the

³¹ The World Trade Center, in fact, is a prime example of how the city officials to use tax-exempted development projects in order to bolster its revenue-base.

World was assuming its definite shape, Tozzoli writes the following to Platner: “Finally, as you know, the Observation Deck must be a revenue producer for the World Trade Center” (“Letter to Waren Platner”).

Tozzoli’s call to order makes it clear that the underlying logic of the observatory could never be anything other than the logic of speculative investment. However, Platner’s insistence on Top of the World’s democratic nature only appears contradictory. What the exchange between the two men shows instead is that the idea of democratic citizenship was becoming ever more closely aligned with the concept of the for-profit city. Thus, the conceptual history of Top of the World, the debates around what this place can and should be, mirrors the negotiations around what New York City as a whole should look like. It is a small but poignant detail that the citizens for whose enjoyment Platner pretends to construct Top of the World never have a seat at the negotiation table. It is a dialogue that takes place exclusively between a professional elite. The public, whenever it appears, is merely a stubborn, reactionary force that one needs to educate about why something will be good for them.

4.5 WTC IN CRISIS

From very early on, the World Trade Center faced a crisis of public acceptance. The thought that the Twin Towers would dwarf the Empire State Building by

almost a hundred meters apparently sat uneasy with many people. The towers seemed like a direct threat to the already precarious social harmony of the city.

In an article that appeared in Harper's Magazine and was reprinted in the German journal *Bauwelt*, architectural critic Wolf von Eckardt, who wrote favorably of architect Minoru Yamasaki's previous designs, called the World Trade Center an "angsterregende Instrument städtemordender Bauwut:" that is, "the fearful instrument of uricide" (909). For von Eckardt, the building was the result of megalomaniac urban-planning that operated in disjunction with the interests of the city's inhabitants. He particularly laments that construction of the World Trade Center would inevitably lead to the disappearance of Radio Row, an agglomeration of small businesses, warehouses and open-air vendors that specialized in supplying replacement parts for radios and hi-fi equipment. Radio Row was its own chaotic, yet efficient economic ecosystem, running on close-knit connections and everyday collaboration between individual merchants.

Block upon block over 300 street level stores, with over three times as many enterprises in the floors above them were jammed into 20- to 25-foot storefronts [...] Their shelves and floor spaces were packed with vacuum tubes, condensers, transistors and other high-tech bric-a-brac for ham radio enthusiasts and do-it-yourselfers. (Steinhardt)

For von Eckardt, Radio Row was an example of healthy organic urban growth, comparable to the medieval guild-system, which resulted in certain areas of a

city becoming synonymous with the trades that operated within them (von Eckardt 910f). It was also, one might add, representative of the type of economy that, as previously outlined, had for the longest time formed New York's economic foundation. Revolving around small-scale manufacturing, light industry and retail, it was based on the trading of actual goods, whereas the World Trade Center stood for an entirely different system: abstract values and a financial market dissociated from the real economy. Perhaps uniquely so, the World Trade Center represented a trend toward de-industrialization that Fitch, Brash and Philips-Fein describe, and thus provoked widespread critical disapproval as well as outrage within affected communities. In July 1962, long before the building became an architectural reality, shop owners staged the symbolic funeral of Oscar Nadel, owner of Oscar's Radio and president of the Downtown Businessmen's Association (Pitzke). Nadel was carried in an open coffin through lower Manhattan and set down in front of his store. There, he accused the Port Authority of supporting a project which would put shop-owners such as himself out of business in order to please representatives of the financial sector (Pitzke).

In 2002, in an interview with enological magazine *Wine Services*, Warren Platner remembers the criticism that the World Trade Center faced and how the observatory helped win the public over:

In the current wave of sympathy for the plight of the colossus and its occupants, what has been forgotten is how reviled the World Trade Center

was when under construction and newly occupied. New York's real estate community hated it and attacked it, the New York press condemned it [...] and politicians made hay by scandalizing it. ("Response to Questions")

The observation deck, as the archival material shows, represented an effort to reconcile the public with a new urban reality. Although the feeling of crisis is not explicitly mentioned in Platner's correspondence, there is a detectable tone of urgency and general responsibility when he discusses his designs for the observatory. The public image of the city was out of control, and had degenerated into an uncontrollable mess. Moreover, the World Trade Center itself represented a quixotic, outsized endeavor. Top of the World, itself the result of a reorganization of the city under the aegis of real estate speculation, signified an attempt to popularize its own conditions of existence. It was a spectacular observation deck overlooking a city governed by the forces of speculation.

4.6 PLATNER BEGINS HIS RESEARCH

The first thing Platner did to sketch out the observatory is look at similar installations around the world. According to an archived copy of a 1976 issue of *Interiors Magazine*, Platner visited the Vatican, Eiffel Tower, the Statue of Liberty as well as the balcony of the RCA building, now known as the Comcast building (Gueft). This survey afforded him three basic insights. One, the

observatory caters primarily to a tourist audience that is likely to have walked around a lot and is thus tired and foot weary. Platner assumed that before entering the actual observatory people would have stood in line, waiting either at the ticket booth or at the elevators. Therefore, once they have entered the observatory, there should be an opportunity for visitors to sit down while taking in the view, preferably without obstructing the view of others and without causing disruptions to the flow of people moving in and out of the space. This would prove to be trickier than initially thought. Two, when there is low visibility because of fog, these sites quickly lose their appeal. Therefore, the observatory should be fun even when the weather prohibits viewing. This assertion that the observatory needed to be more than just a view became essential to Top of the World's design. Platner's third and final finding is that there should be something else to do after one has left the observatory. He imagined that people would want to visit Top of the World on holiday, and as one attraction among many (Gueft).

4.7 MILTON GLASER JOINS PLATNER – THE CHILDCRAFT STORE

At some point during the planning stages, Platner decided that Top of the World should not be worked on alone and recruited help. It is not entirely clear if it was Warren Platner or Joe Baum who hired Milton Glaser to come up with a coherent graphic design for both the Windows on the World restaurant and the

Top of the World Observatory. There is only an internal dossier, which might have been used to convince the Port Authority of Glaser's aptitude. This dossier lists his involvement in the design of *Childcraft Education's* flagship store. Childcraft was a company known for progressive educational children's toys and its flagship store "combined many unique architectural and graphic features to create a total environment, complete with sound track, for children and shoppers" (Dossier on Milton Glaser). It is notable that the dossier lists the Childcraft Store as Glaser's most significant work. The store, in combining the logic of the happening with its emphasis on creating an encompassing atmosphere or mood with the logic of retail, already displays some of the elements Glaser later wanted to integrate into Top of the World.

Originally located on East 58th street between Lexington and Third Avenue, *Childcraft* is now the site of the Bloomberg Tower. The store's entrance resembled a giant, multi-colored rainbow and featured two doors: one small door for kids and one regularly sized door for their parents.³² "Within the store" Beth Kleber writes in a blog entry, "durable plastic laminate display units were color-coded by appropriate age group" ("Childcraft"). An oblong, round shape marked the staircase that led to the store's bottom floor. Other than these distinctive visual components, the store featured a unique audio concept as a "soundtrack of trains, planes, crickets and thunderstorms played

³² On its opening day, as Glaser recalls, one of the vice-presidents of the company tried to enter through the children's door and bumped his head in the process. After that, the children's door was closed for a year and was signposted later on (Graphic and Design 173)

throughout” (“Childcraft”). The color-coding provided quick and subtle cues to orient browsing customers, while the round shapes and soundtrack supplied audio-visual pleasure and the feeling of having entered a world of gentle, friendly consumerism.

In a true generalist spirit Glaser, the graphic designer, designed not only the logotype but every other element as well. And he sought to provide customers with environmental information that would assist them while shopping, relying on them to integrate bits of visual information into a coherent model. A good example of this was the color-coding used to arrange the toys according to age groups. This spoke to the importance of pattern-recognition, while the extra door for children took into account how perspectives might differ depending on one’s age. In what today seems like an early example of a shop based on the ideals of the experience economy, the Childcraft store presented customers with a consumption environment where product and presentation were fused into one. Glaser’s successful all-encompassing approach will show itself again in Top of the World’s design.

4.8 PARA-NEW YORK OR THE INVENTION OF COMPLEXITY.

In June 28, 1972 Milton Glaser wrote to Warren Platner, outlining his idea for their cooperation and expressing his excitement to be working on a “multi-media exhibit facility for the observation area at the World Trade Center”

(“Letter to Platner, June 28, 1972”). His ambition, as described in this first letter, is to come up with a

basic editorial theme for the contents of the observation area, which would identify it as a uniquely marketable, identifiable and promotable site. It would be a new idea of what an observation tower is, with new methods of making the observation area itself, observable. (“Letter to Platner, June 28, 1972”)

Platner’s response to this letter is not contained in the archives. However, he seems to have agreed with what Glaser proposed, as a about a week later, the latter sent another letter to Platner. In it, he goes into more detail about how he wants to achieve this unique marketability:

My basic approach [...] would be to provide an orientation and information center for visitors to the city and residents as well. The tallest observation tower in the world seems like a particularly appropriate place to provide a service of this kind. The underlying philosophical idea is to make the city visible. (“Letter to Platner, July 7, 1972”)

What is interesting here is that Glaser describes the city as something that is not readily accessible to the naked eye. Simply viewing it from above is not enough. Instead, it needs to be *made visible*, constructed, and designed, as if somehow its material presence is in danger of escaping visual perception. He also does not mention windows at all, as if the observatory’s location on the 107th floor is a negligible detail, and people would be looking in rather than out. To this end he plans an intricate, at times hallucinatory landscape, where

visitors would grasp New York's complexity by moving through representations of what he sees as the city's constitutive elements:

A superficial survey of some of these elements that would be included might be:

- The geology of the city.
- The history of the city in the terms of artifacts and paintings.
- The physical geography and some indication of how it has changed.
- The architectural, artistic, cultural and social environment of the city.
- The cities' services in terms of what is happening today.

Each of these categories would be broken down further to provide more specific information" ("Letter to Platner July 7, 1972").

Glaser seems to distrust the inherent promise of the observatory, i.e. that a sufficient understanding of the city could be reached simply by viewing it from above. Instead, he regards the view as something that needs to be augmented in order to make the city comprehensible. His method relies on empirical data, which becomes apparent when he describes how the elements that he proposes should be broken down further. With regards to what he calls the "social environment of the city," for example, he suggests the following:

one could break down all the ethnic groups of the city in terms of their origins, numbers, contributions and locations. A screen showing a series of New York faces running parallel to a track with New York voices might be one way that this exhibition could be dealt with. ("Letter to Platner July 7, 1972")

Glaser is, as James C. Scott calls it, *seeing like a state* (cf. Scott 1999). His proposition to “break down all the ethnic groups of the city” echoes the optical statecraft Scott describes, which was “devoted to rationalizing and standardizing what was a social hieroglyph into a legible and administratively more convenient format” (3). Further, Glaser wants to use the moving image—a “screen” on which viewers see a parallel montage of the faces and voices of New York’s inhabitants—as a way of buttressing this data-driven empiricism with a qualitative element. Again, it is important keep in mind the fact that Glaser is suggesting these ideas in order to impose a visual order on the city at a time when its social cohesiveness was perceived to be disintegrating.

When Glaser discusses how to represent New York’s cultural richness, he again uses a combination of sociology and graphic design:

Under the heading of New York’s cultural environment, a survey could be taken of all the museums in the city with thousands of transparencies built up to form a stained glass wall of tiny images showing the collections to indicate New York’s artistic resources. (“Letter to Platner July 7, 1972”)

Here superimposition, or a sort of visual overlay, will make the city visually accessible. Although Glaser does not offer much technical detail, his idea of a surface that generates an extra layer of information and thus enhances the “natural” view sounds like an early analog attempt at augmented reality.

This wish to combine sociological data, audiovisual media and funfair-like attractions into one coherent experience continues throughout the letter.

Glaser proposes an eclectic assortment of elements that should contribute to what he calls a

celebration and an investigation of the city both as a tool and a work of art. There should be unexpected things like a small bus whose front is a movie screen. People could get on for a ten-minute simulated drive through New York as 150 miles an hour. (A film of a one minute ride down the whole east river Drive exists) Some tiny Fresnel lens windows might be inserted from time to time to break the outside images into 1000 small views of the skyline. A neon garden could be designed. (“Letter to Platner July 7, 1972”)

These elements aim to either condense the experience of the city (the simulated bus ride) or fragment it (the lenses that kaleidoscopically break down the totality of the view into a 1000 tiny images). The simulated bus drive also recalls Koolhaas’ description of New York as a descendant of the funfair-filled Coney Island.³³

Glaser concludes his first letter to Platner by summarizing his methodology, and by expressing his belief that the observatory can be both a popular tourist attraction an epistemic tool to make the city comprehensible again:

As you can see a good part of the fundamental problem would be involved in the gathering and evaluation of information. It goes without saying that

³³ An important yet unnamed source for Glaser is early 20th century funfair rides; more specifically, those of the famous Hale’s Tours, where visitors could board a train, a car, or even an ocean steamer. These contraptions would then be artificially rocked and tilted, as projected moving images provided the background imagery.

the presentation of all this information cannot be academic or tedious. Everything must be presented dramatically and beautifully with an eye toward creating an environment in which viewers participants [sic] will have a pleasant and easily comprehended experiences [...] I feel very deeply that this could not only be an irresistibly attractive facility for visitors and residents, but more important it would provide for a rich and rewarding experience that would genuinely help to make the city comprehensible. (“Letter to Platner, July 7, 1972”)

Here, Glaser’s propositions sound very similar to Geddes’s conception of the Outlook Tower. Both Outlook Tower and Top of the World were to be based on data that was collected beforehand. This data was then to be prepared and presented in a form that was both informative and entertaining, allowing visitors to gain a complete picture of the surrounding city. Further, Glaser’s observation deck sought to produce an enhanced view. By looking at the city from distance and height, and aided by visualizations of collected data, visitors could engage in what Geddes, invoking Aristotle, called a “synoptic” viewing of the city.

4.9 “AN EXPLANATORY VISION”

Glaser’s third letter to Platner, dated November 29, 1972, suggests he had changed his approach, while also maintaining and refining some of his earlier propositions. Presumably after some back and forth between Platner, Glaser

and the Port Authority, Top of the World was beginning to look less and less like an attraction that represents the city but rather like a city in its own right; that is, a para- or pseudo-Manhattan where visitors could conveniently learn everything there is to know about the city. At this point, both towers are already standing, and the official opening is only a few months away. Before he goes into further detail, however, Glaser restates what he sees as the objectives of the observatory:

- (1) To entertain. Although a great deal of information will be compacted into the exhibition, the primary experience should be one of fun, with learning an inevitable fringe benefit, but in no way requiring a self-conscious effort on the part of visitors.
- (2) To provide an alternative experience on days of limited visibility.
- (3) To provide a complementary and/or explanatory vision of the city, related, where possible, to the various views from the observation tower.
- (4) To keep visitors moving at a reasonably steady pace.
- (5) To convey a sense of the complexity, variety, density, and ethnic richness and color of the city and its environs. (“Letter to Platner, November 29, 1972”)

In general, Glaser aligned his agenda with that of Platner, who, as mentioned, also saw the constant movement of people, and the need to find an equally fun alternative to observing the city on days when weather conditions were prohibitive as the central challenges to the observatory’s design. What remains, on the other hand, is Glaser’s pedagogical impetus. The observatory

is again described as a place where people should learn things without making an effort to do so. The acquisition of knowledge, as Glaser puts it, is rather an “inevitable fringe benefit.” Glaser mentions once more that the observatory should confront visitors with the complexity of the city while at the same time never ceasing to entertain them.

How does Glaser intend to put all this into practice? As the letter describes, what he foresees is essentially a miniaturized world’s fair, a New York Expo where the city appears as a smaller version of itself.

The exhibition will consist of a series of pavilions facing the observation windows allowing visitors to walk between the windows and the pavilions. The pavilions would be recessed so that mini-environments might be created where desirable, such as a Chinese grocery, a Dutch fort, etc. The overall feeling should be one of festival, a celebration of the many cultures which are part of New York’s heritage. (“Letter to Platner, November 29, 1972”)

The idea of equipping the observatory with a miniaturized copy of New York had already been floating around. On February 4, 1972, Edward B. Wallace, an administrative assistant at the World Trade Department of the Port Authority sent a letter to John Thornley of Warren Platner associates. Included with it was a copy of the plans of the massive model of New York, which was built for the 1964 World’s Fair (“Letter to Thornley, February 4, 1972”). Based on a variety of data sourced from the city’s cadaster, aerial photography and fire

insurance maps, “the Panorama of the City of New York, [was] the world’s largest (a half acre) three-dimensional model that featured every structure, bridge, highway, and park of the city” (Samuel 136/37). Apparently, the model featured a day and night cycle and even movable parts, with aircraft landing at and departing from the city’s airports. Ultimately, it was not used in the observatory but, as Glaser’s letter shows, the thought of miniaturizing the city remained.

In a similar manner to the Panorama, Glaser wanted to rely on empirical methods to source the data necessary for his pavilions or mini-environments, as he calls them: “Wherever possible, members of the various ethnic groups will be consulted as to content and approach, to create a sense of unity and pride” (“Letter to Platner, November 29, 1972”). Aside from these consultations, Glaser suggests approaching museums, universities and private collectors to source the necessary materials. After everything had been gathered, he intended to display the data through what sounds like an intricate, city-themed ghost-ride:

to engender a sense of adventure, the display techniques will be varied and surprising where suitable, encompassing changing levels, multi-media, motorized parts, button-pressing participation, stairs, curtains, distorting lenses, one-way glass, bubbles, changes of scale, black light, animation, drawings, pop-ups, dioramas, objects, paintings, slides and photos. (“Letter to Platner November 29, 1972”)

These multi-media pavilions were then to be themed after the city's various ethnicities. From today's perspective, this provokes a certain uneasiness, given the racist and exoticist underpinnings of so-called ethnological expositions or human zoos.

With regards to the Chinese and Italian pavilions (presumably standing in for Little Italy and Chinatown), Glaser goes into some detail on how he imagines these spaces to look. The Chinese pavilion, for example, will have a

background showing pictures of rice paddies, Hong Kong etc. Foreground Chinatown, shops, restaurants. A display visible from both sides might be set up as a Chinese grocery window through which visitors could walk, with its beautiful organization and variety of exotic vegetables, mushrooms, fish, etc. Color slides of the Chinese New Year, hanging objects, a map of Chinatown, interview with a young Chinese surgeon or stockbroker. ("Letter to Platner November 29, 1972")

The role world expositions play in Glaser's plans is salient. Whereas the fairs of 1939 and 1964 sought to translate industry narratives into immersive entertainment, Glaser's adaptation of these forms is guided by a desire to turn the city into a spectacle. Put bluntly, Glaser's multimedia village is like an intricate PR campaign—a machine with which to generate an image of New York that makes up for the actual city's failures and shortcomings. Stepping out of South Tower New York's 107th floor elevators, visitors would find an exotic, harmonious and exciting place. This was a place where crime, tensions and a mounting fiscal crisis were rendered invisible—an alternate reality

distant enough to be undisturbed by the chaos supposedly unfolding hundreds of meters below. The “citizens” of this para-Manhattan would be guided at every step, led from one spectacle to the next, to ensure a constant flow of people and therefore an optimal extraction of the financial potential of the observatory. Although Glaser speaks of making the city comprehensible, what he really seems to mean is to strip it of its inherent complexity in order to turn it into a consumable experience. On some level, visiting the city after one has glanced at it from Top of the World would be redundant. Why bother with the real thing when one can enjoy its copy? In that sense, Top of the World presents a strange vision of a city without a public. To use Platner’s words, a democratic acre-in-the-sky where the only form of interaction is “button-pressing participation.”

Figure 14 is an early model of the observation deck. Three figures are placed inside a corridor optically receding towards a black vanishing point. Special bench elements (more on that later) are installed in front of the large windows. More of these benches can be seen at the back wall, their steel pipes extending into the ceiling. The ceiling and parts of the back wall are clad in a reflective material. Platner had long harbored the idea of installing a mirrored ceiling. The ceiling would reflect the view from the windows, so people looking up (into the sky, if you will) would in fact be looking outside. Parts of the ceiling should extend unto the walls, forming a mirroring tunnel of sorts. Behind the figure in the foreground one can make out plastic tubes filled with dried pasta.

These, as can be gathered from the archival material, are stand-ins for the media content that was to be installed there. As this model shows, Top of the World's visitors were to be totally immersed in optical spectacles. The mirror-ceiling would literally multiply the view from the windows whereas the tube-shaped elements in the background would provide additional information on the city. The observation deck, as the model portrays it, would provide multiple extensive framings of the view instead of relying on just the windows. However, this version of the observation deck was to remain a fantasy, as the Port Authority deemed such optical extravagance superfluous.



Fig. 14: "Model of the Observation Deck with mirrored ceiling and bench elements being visible."
Box 74, Folder 15, WPR.

4.10 SEVERE BUDGET CUTS

In a different letter dating back to November 21, 1973, and addressed to Edward Wallace of the Port Authority, Glaser tries to put a price point on his vision of a para-Manhattan. His cost breakdown lists the following items: \$170,000 for Media, \$20,000 for “[s]till photography, biographies, objects, locations etc.” \$40,000 for “[c]olor prints, transparencies & B&W prints,” \$20,000 for “[t]ypography & film positives” and \$25,000 for “[p]rojectors and mechanical devices” (“Letter to Wallace, November 21, 1973”). On top of this, he calculates \$225,000 for the actual construction work, which would up the final cost to about half a million dollars (ca. 3 million when adjusted for inflation).

This estimate was preceded by objections brought up by the Port Authority, which did not share the same enthusiasm about installing a multimedia environment in the observatory. Indeed, there is extensive correspondence between Milton Glaser, Warren Platner and Guy Tozzoli in which the subject of a “Media Theater” comes up time and again. Although it is not entirely clear whether this Media Theater refers to Glaser’s concept of the series of pavilions as a whole or if it is just one element within that concept, the correspondence suggests great reluctance on the part of Guy Tozzoli, who heads the World Trade Center Project.

On October 11, 1973, Platner wrote to Guy Tozzoli in an attempt to convince him of the importance of the media theater. In his letter he confirmed that they have stopped working on the “Observation Deck Media Theater” altogether, presumably awaiting budgetary clearance. Platner tries his best to convince Tozzoli that

the Theater is a key element in the program and design of the Deck and the other elements work as well as they do, partly because of the existence of this element. It also has a flexibility of operation and material not so easily obtained in the other elements and requires no operators and minimal maintenance. (“Letter to Tozzoli. October 11, 1973”)

Apparently, the media theater felt gimmicky to Tozzoli—a superfluous and costly addition. Platner let Tozzoli know that they would have a meeting with Milton Glaser and his staff in order to revise their plans and asked him to withhold any decisions until another meeting had been set (“Letter to Tozzoli, October 11, 1973”). At the same time, Platner wrote to other members of the World Trade Center project staff to clarify the project’s technical details. In a letter to Edward Wallace he writes the following:

In order for you to make an informed decision regarding the disposition of the Media Theater, the following data is pertinent: We suggest that the term, MEDIA THEATER, is a misnomer. The space is just one display in the entire exhibition, but one in which we use video tape to produce and image and encourage the audience to sit on benches for a brief period [...] The viewing room is also designed to operate continuously. At maximum peak periods, the Deck will process 100 people every 5 minutes. This is the rate

of flow for which all elements of the Deck have been designed [...] Ushers would not be required. The video tape player would be running continuously in a remote location. No projectionist would be needed. (“Letter to Wallace, October 23, 1973”)

Platner’s insistence that the Media Theater was not a regular cinema suggests that the changes in film culture that Haidee Wasson describes and which saw a miniaturization of screens and the introduction of new, easy-to-be-handled formats, had not yet reached officials at the Port Authority. This leads to a series of misunderstandings that eventually threaten the plans for Top of the World in their entirety. For Tozzoli and his staff, the cinematic dispositive necessarily included a number of elements: ushers, a projectionist, and film reels that had to be rewound and changed manually. They imagined lines at the entrance, unruly crowds that need to be guided back into the observatory, and staff to do so. The fact that Platner needs to explain how a video tape player works points toward a conceptual disconnect in terms of how, where and under what circumstances one can see moving images. Ultimately, Platner’s pleas were to no avail. After having a final meeting Guy Tozzoli settles the issue:

After an extensive review of our entire Observation Deck Program, I have decided that the ‘Media Theater’ is not an essential component of our exhibition on the 107th Floor. While I was not enthusiastic about the content of the movie itself, I was particularly concerned that operational

problems attributive to the 'Theater' out weighed its aesthetic and entertainment advantages. Finally, as you know, the Observation Deck must be a revenue producer for the World Trade Center. As you can see in the attached breakdown, project costs for the operation of Observation Deck are already prodigiously high. [...] You are to proceed with your overall Deck planning as per our last meeting, but kindly keep the costs as expressed in the attached list in mind. ("Letter to Platner October 29, 1973")

Tozzoli's reminder that the function of the Observation Deck is to generate revenue and not, as Glaser envisions, to make use of a wide range of technologies to make the city comprehensible, eventually lead to a radical reconfiguration of the observatory. In a revised estimate from January 15, 1974 sent by Platner to Tozzoli, Glaser's exhibition costs are not even listed.

The final budget cuts concerned an optical illusion which Platner had planned to have built into the observatory. But the Port Authority demanded the replacement of the reflective ceiling with a more inexpensive solution. Glaser, perhaps as the result of growing frustration, decided instead to have no ceiling at all, leaving concrete, steel beams and piping exposed. The removal of the reflective ceiling is the final nail in the coffin of the original concept. The final version is much more subdued than the immersive environment Platner and Glaser had planned.

4.11 STREET IN THE SKY

Despite all the compromises and changes, the idea that the observatory should resemble a public urban space survived. In later press releases, the deck is frequently called a street in the sky, a sort of high-altitude boulevard where visitors can partake in *flânerie* high above the ground. However, even this new simplified version soon faced substantial problems.

Minoru Yamasaki, the World Trade Center's architect, suffered from acrophobia—a fear of heights. His window design reflects this. In contrast to the glass curtain-wall typically used for tall buildings that maximized the amount of interior space receiving natural light, Yamasaki “wanted to provide a sense of security for people in the building. [...] the windows were just wide enough so that people with similar fears could hold on to the wall with both hands while looking out” (Allen 174). The result of this humanist design approach, first developed for the Michigan Consolidated Gas building, is the kind of slender, cathedral-like floor-to-ceiling windows that “became characteristic features of Yamasaki's skyscrapers” (175). When designing the World Trade Center, a building whose sheer size already meddled with the humanist idea of building close to the human scale, Yamasaki opted for a similar solution:

Narrow windows—by now a Yamasaki trademark—satisfied his search for openings that were aesthetically pleasing, economical, and able to

assuage those with a fear of heights. He justified his tendency toward psychological enclosure in his skyscrapers, saying, 'I believe that a building should be designed so that its occupants are very aware that they are actually within a structure enjoying its protection, rather than attempting to attain the sense of being outdoors by making the building all glass. (204)

This philosophy in turn led to all sorts of problems for Warren Platner, whose job consisted mostly in creating spaces that had to be first and foremost *spectacular*, potentially even triggering the kind of acrophobic vertigo Yamasaki tried so hard to avoid.

There was another problem: not only was the observatory dependent on providing panoramic views, but it also needed to maximize both viewing angles *and* the number of possible viewers. Additionally, Platner wanted to provide seating for footsore visitors while ensuring unobstructed views even when the observatory reached its maximum capacity of 1,200 visitors per hour. It was a tricky problem. If he installed benches in front of the windows, then people sitting down would block the view of those standing behind them. But if he moved the benches away from the windows, visitors could not simultaneously sit and watch.

To solve these dilemmas, Platner did various things. First, he convinced Yamasaki to widen the 107th floor window openings by about 6 inches by reducing the thickness of the mullions. This happened in both towers, so Windows on the World Restaurant and the Top of the World Observatory would

benefit.³⁴ Second, he had the floor raised, so that seated and standing visitors would not obstruct the views of one another. This was because the raised floor provided legroom of for seated visitors. Third, and this is where Platner's expertise as a furniture designer came into play, he constructed a unique viewing bench made from bent steel rods that combined the functions of a bench and a railing.

³⁴ Guy Tozzoli, when interviewed by Gael Greene, credited himself with convincing Yamasaki to widen the window apertures. He even claimed to have constructed a window-mockup in his office to provide graphic evidence. When the restaurant opened, Yamasaki apparently admitted to Tozzoli that making the windows larger was the right call. I am almost certain that it was Platner who built the mockup and convincing Yamasaki.

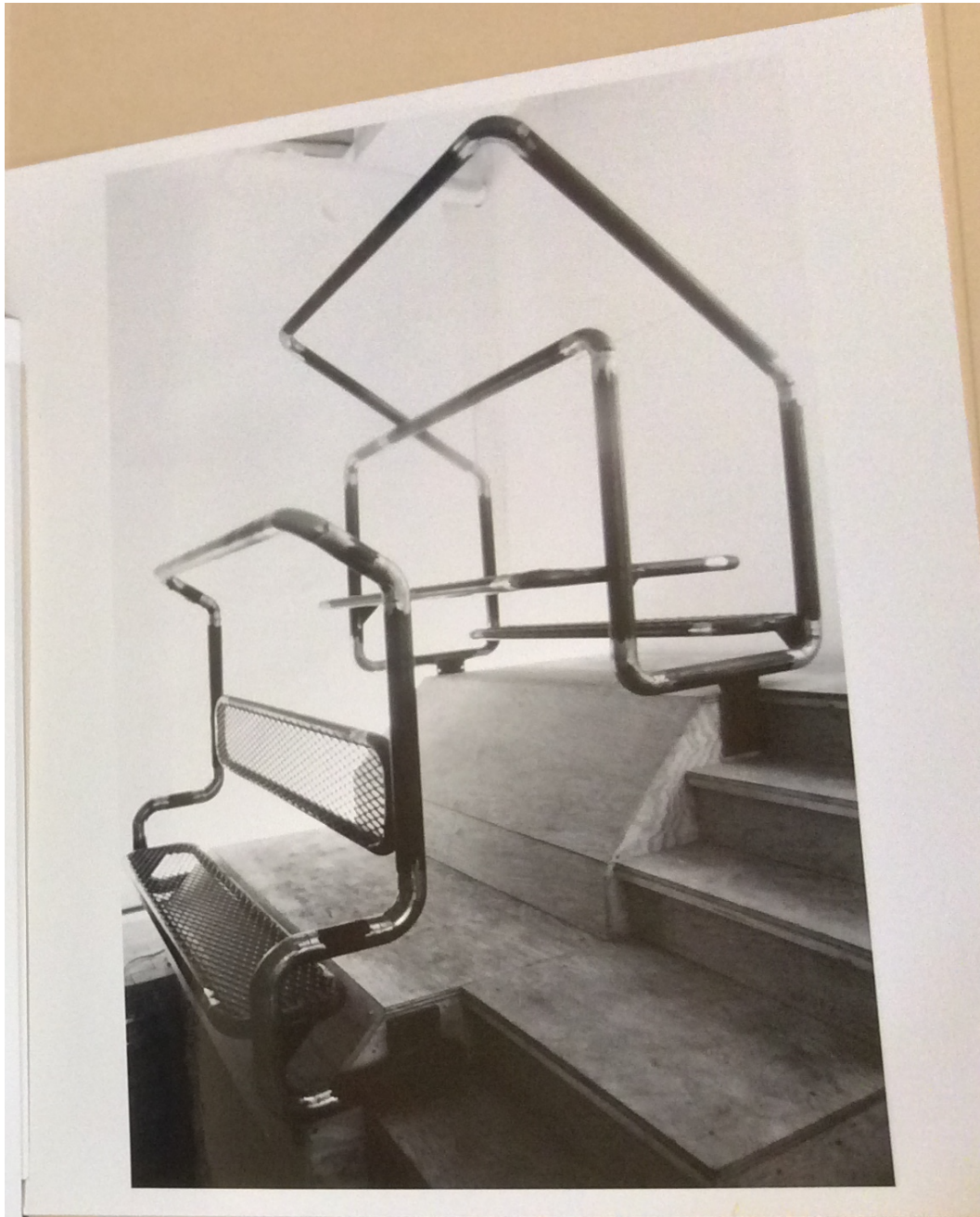


Fig. 15: "Bench Element Prototype." Box 74, Folder 15, WPR.

While one person sat down on the bench, another leant over the railing. It is a solution that is both coherent with the concept of a street in the sky, and allows as many people as possible to move through the observatory at any given time. In a press release Platner describes how the

design of this deck offers the visitor attractions unparalleled in other observation facilities. I know of no other which provides seating for hundreds right where the view is [...] One can sit with nose pressed against the glass and look down or sit casually along the path; the leaning rails are designed for comfort and crowds and minimally obstruct the view. We know of no similar place where hundreds at a time can enjoy such a view in comfort [...] We are frequently retained to plan and build thoughtfully for the privileged few. It has been, therefore, a particular satisfaction to conceive of what these visitors' facilities should consist of and to build for the millions who will come here. ("Press Release 1977")

The special benches indicate the mode with which the visitors of Top of the World were to perceive the city. Their form, i.e. the fact that those in front do not obstruct the view of those behind, makes the benches akin to cinema seating. One leans against the railing of a ship to gaze out toward the sea. In the case of Top of the World, the city replaces the sea.



Fig. 16: Alexandre Georges: "Interior views of WTC observation deck." Box 74, Folder 17, WPR.

A seemingly innocuous detail, the benches tell us a lot about how visibility within this new version of Top of the World was conceptualized. The benches encourage one to either stand or sit still, and they engender precisely the transformation from active walker into passive contemplator that de Certeau wrote about. In the images that Alexandre Georges took immediately after the

observatory's opening, one clearly senses an emphasis on serene contemplation. The observation deck in these pictures is presented like a sort of monastery. Withdrawn into himself, a visitor leans against one of the benches, his gaze seemingly arrested by the sight of the city. In 1984 de Certeau, also making use of a nautical metaphor, noted that the

1370 foot high tower that serves as a prow for Manhattan continues to construct the fiction that creates readers, makes the complexity of the city readable, and immobilizes its opaque mobility in a transparent text. (92)

What Georges' photograph shows are people captivated by this act of reading. Although the final iteration of Top of the World appears much more subdued in comparison to the funfair-like thrills Glaser envisioned, the original idea to provide a place from which the city can be made comprehensible remains recognizable.

In Figure 17, we see the observation deck from another angle (the picture was likely taken at one of the four corners). A woman has sat down at one of the benches. Her outstretched legs communicate comfort and rest, and her gaze extends toward the windows. This is what Platner had in mind when he wrote about the footsore tourists arriving at the observation deck after having walked around all day. Most likely to reduce noise, the floor consists of rubber mats. Above the woman, one can see the exposed ceiling—Platner's response to the Port Authority budget cuts. On the wall behind her, there is a poster and some objects that look like cutouts of faces. Presumably, this is

what remained of the multi-media spectacle that the designers had originally envisioned. Two men, seemingly deep in conversation are sitting a little further away from the woman. One of the men has turned his face towards the camera while the other, although talking, does not look at his friend but toward the windows. In the background, individual visitors can be seen leaning against the bench-railings, equally captivated by the view outside.



Fig. 17: Alexandre Georges: "Interior views of WTC observation deck," Box 74, Folder 17, WPR.

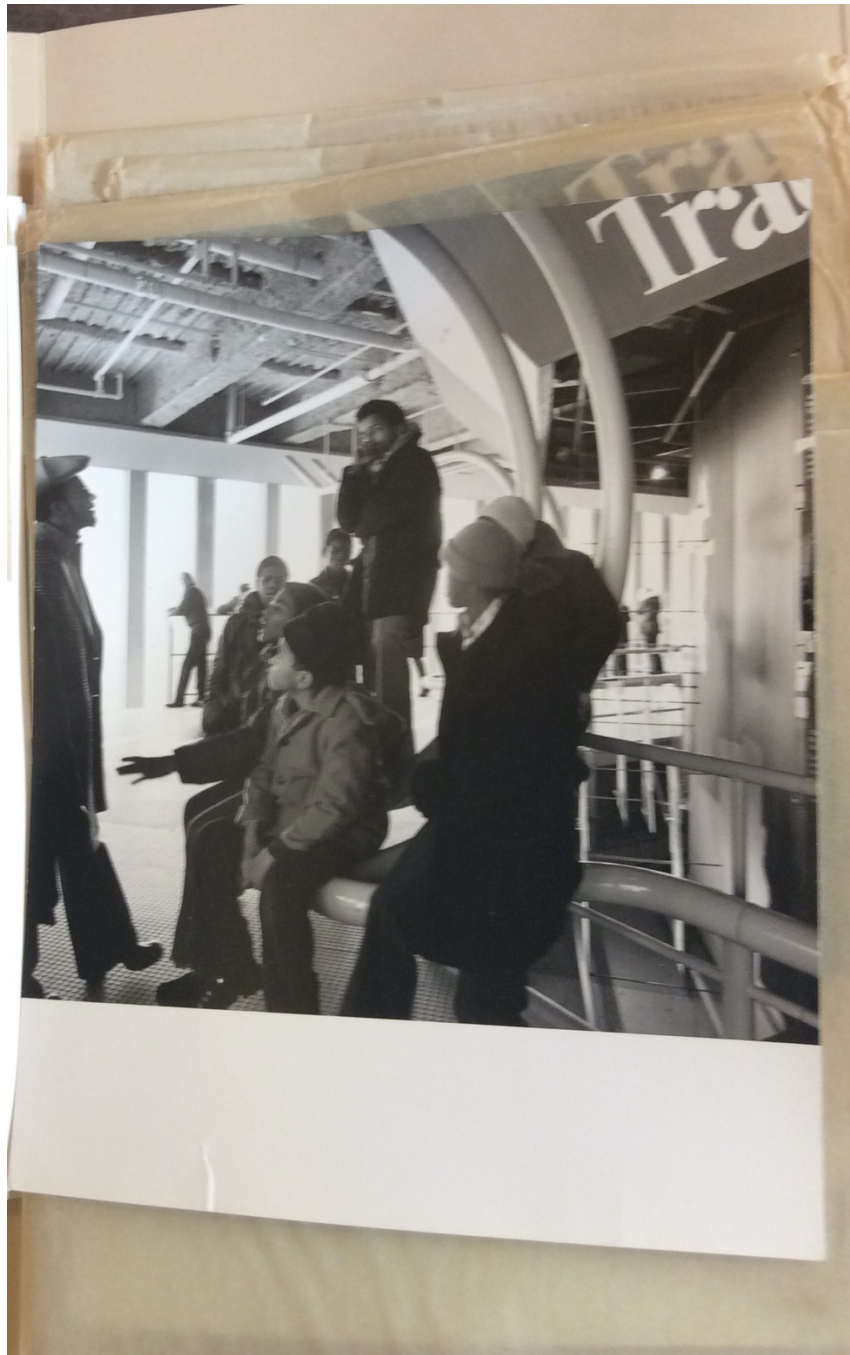


Fig. 18: Alexandre Georges "Interior Views of WTC Observation Deck" Box 74, Folder 17, WPR.

Figure 18, even though a far cry from Glaser's initial ideas, reveals the observatory's educational ambitions. Taken from the same spot as Figure 17, the image shows a group of eight young boys (presumably schoolboys) gathered at one of the benches. An adult, likely to be their teacher, is standing in front of them. One of the boys is standing upright, holding his face in his hands pensively. Although one can only speculate, the group does not seem like a group of tourists. Rather, the scene resembles a field trip, an impromptu class held atop of the World Trade Center. Perhaps the man in front was giving a lecture on the history of New York.³⁵ Invoking Andrea Wilson Nightingale, the young men appear as *theoroi*, speculating on the spectacular view on Top of the World.

What all these images have in common is a feeling of serenity and contemplation. Although the observation deck was clearly conceptualized as mass entertainment, the people in the photographs, with the exception of the group of young men, appear as isolated spectators. Apparently, the act of viewing the city was a solitary affair. The people in these pictures seem to be looking inward as much as outward. However, one needs to keep in mind that these images are likely to have been used as promotional material and thus depict a somewhat idealized situation. It is precisely that attempt at idealization that makes them so interesting; they show not what the

³⁵ The entire situation is indeed reminiscent of The Tulip's render video. It is another Classroom in the Sky.

observation deck was, but what it aspired to be, a place of calm, serene spectatorship, and completely unobstructed views. Here, these images seem to say, “lifted out of the city’s grasp” (de Certeau 92) one is now able to contemplate it from a distance.

On a somewhat prophetic note, Platner added the following to the press release: “Over the years it is expected that our developments here will serve as a prototype for other similar work by others. These are elemental designs and now unique” (“Press Release 1977”). As I will show in the next chapter, this was indeed the case.

4.12 CONCLUSION

For Julian Brash, the Hudson Yards project represented an attempt to “reshape New York City as an *urban environment* in accordance with its ‘brand’” (18)—a brand that imagined the city as a “place of competition, elite sociality, cosmopolitanism, and luxury, populated by ambitious, creative, hardworking, and intelligent innovators” (18). Unprecedented in scale, the Hudson Yard’s project and the ambitions for which it stands are nothing new. Top of the World, as I have sought to argue in this chapter, can be considered as an early iteration of a philosophy of urban planning based on speculation and spectacle. It is therefore unsurprising that one of the main features with which Hudson Yards was advertised was a large-scale observation deck.

When designing Top of the World, Milton Glaser outlined a distinct model of urbanity, one that confronted the popular narrative of the city as a complex problem, and presented the observatory as a solution. Developed at a time when New York was facing bankruptcy, crime, and population exodus, the observatory was a miniaturized version, a model, and a simulation through which the city could appear comprehensible again. As an additional benefit, it would promote a version of the city more aligned with its brand image. When New York's problems seemed overwhelming and insurmountable, and the police distributed pamphlets at the airport that urged people to stay away, Top of the World offered itself as a touristically viable alternative. A sanitized, celebratory version of the city, which, had it been constructed according to the original concepts, might have functioned as a perfect synecdoche, a part made not to represent the whole but to replace it, a sign interchangeable with the reality it was supposed to signify.

Channelling Baudrillard, what Top of the World then sought to construct was an "operational double, a programmatic, metastable, perfectly descriptive machine that offers all the signs of the real and short-circuits all its vicissitudes" (*Simulacra and Simulation 2*). It was to function similarly to how, for Baudrillard, Disneyland functions. Both are "presented as imaginary in order to make us believe that the rest is real, whereas all of Los Angeles [or New York] and the America that surrounds it are no longer real but belong to

the hyperreal order and to the order of simulation” (12). The designers were driven by the idea that an entire city could be transformed into a smaller but also improved version of itself, which was more accessible, more interesting, more profitable but less complex, refreshingly unburdened by problems like poverty or crime. In short, Top of the World sought to translate the city into a simulation: a one-way street in the sky built to counteract the anxiety-inducing complexity of Fear City.³⁶ \

However, one needs to be aware of the inherently paradoxical nature of Baudrillard’s concept of simulation. For Baudrillard, as Rex Butler explains, simulation

is not an empirical phenomenon, something that actually happens [...] insofar as the simulation he [Baudrillard] is describing exists, it makes any way of verifying it impossible. It means that the very real which we say is lost in simulation and against which we compare it is now only conceivable in simulated form. Indeed, we might even say that, insofar as we can speak of simulation at all, it has not yet occurred, that simulation is proved in its absence. (Butler 24)

When Justin Davidson, in view of the Hudson Yards thinks of a back-lot or para version of Manhattan only precariously tethered to the “real thing” by a subway line, he invokes exactly the kind of worn-out, nostalgic dichotomy that pretends to know how to differentiate between the real thing and its presumed simulation. This is a dichotomy that, as Baudrillard argues, is impossible to

³⁶ It seems perfectly logical that Milton Glaser, after developing the concept for Top of the World, came up with the “I love New York” slogan and logo.

uphold. That being said, it would be pointless to describe Top of the World in the same terms, i.e. calling it a simulation of city that sustains a more or less coherent relation to the “original.”

By no means do I want to argue that Top of the World marks a regrettable and quixotic attempt to copy the “real thing,” an attempt which was bound to fail not only because it was conceptually misguided but also because it was too expensive. Instead I want to suggest that New York, in the 21st century, is increasingly modeled after the observatory. Such a reading is in line with what Julian Brash defined as the agenda of urban branding, which “entails the development of a desired set of images and meanings—a brand—for the city, which can then guide efforts to [...] influence the perceptions of the city held by key individuals and groups” (102). What, for Brash, makes the branding of cities different from other forms of marketing is the fact that ultimately “it subordinates the ‘product’ to the brand” (102). Viewed in this light, Top of the World, more so in its original conception than in the tempered down version it became, pitched a version of New York that a project like the Hudson Yards district came to realize. In reducing the urban experience to the level of signs, Top of the World proposes that cities can be manufactured, marketed and sold—just like any other commodity. Hudson Yards is the most recent expression of that principle.

Milton Glaser’s proposal for the Top of the World presents an example of how such an approach was applied to the city—and its consequences. The

impetus to translate a complex world for a human observer, led to a concept based on simplification and stereotyping. What the observatory proposes in terms of subjectivity is an ideological or perceptual shift from regarding oneself as the inhabitant of a city to the consumer of a visual synecdoche. It is poignant that the fight around the Media Theater, which was in essence a fight about the relationship between architecture and moving images, is the beginning of the end for Glaser's vision of a para-Manhattan. The idea of installing a movie theater in the clouds was bizarre to Tozzoli, who was concerned largely with ensuring that the observatory remained profitable. Profitability is dependent on how many people can be herded through at any given time, so facilities that might lead to congestion had to be avoided. It might be a street in the sky, and there might be benches on which you can sit—but it is a street where you have to keep moving so others do not have to wait.

Top of the World came into existence when US urban policy was at a bifurcation point. For William Tabb, the way in which the crisis of New York in the 1970s, a crisis primarily depicted as one of profligate municipal spending and misguided liberalism, was dealt with on both the local and the national level heralded a general shift in urban policy:

the New York City fiscal crisis—with its resolution in budget cuts and austerity measures on the one hand, and incentives to business, the substitution of economic rationale for social welfare as the guiding force behind government spending, and taxation policies on the other—evolved

as the model for the national economic policies of presidents Ford, Carter, and Reagan. (9)

In an effort to “make the city comprehensible again” Top of the World presupposes that this incomprehensibility is on the one hand a fact and on the other a problem that needs to be dealt with by boosting New York’s brand. In the case of Top of the World, the solution is to transform New York into to a simulation. As such, it is a monument to the abandonment of an urban policy based on public spending and “confident liberalism,” and a pivot towards the paradigm of urbanity catered to businesses and entrepreneurialism. This, together with effort to establish New York as a brand, anticipates what Julian Brash had called the Bloomberg Way, i.e. the effort to position the city as a luxury product (120).

In the end, this proposal proved every bit as prototypical as its designers hoped, and survived even the structure supposed to support it. In 2015, more than a decade after the destruction of the Twin Towers, One World Observatory, housed in the newly constructed One World Trade Center, finally realized Top of the World’s unfulfilled ambitions of creating a hyperreal version of New York City.

5. COUNTING TO ZERO

5.1 REQUIEM FOR ONE WORLD OBSERVATORY

Michael Arad's *Reflecting Absence*, the two pools of water that form the architectural anchor point of the 9/11 Memorial Plaza, presents a paradoxical image: a mirror that reflects nothing. Although water is flowing continuously into them, the two square holes in the ground are never filled. There is a sense of perpetual loss, a wound that does not heal, a grievance beyond repair (and beyond representation), and an infinite well of inconsolability. One can gaze downwards at these two watery screens and see nothing but a faint reflection of the sky above and perhaps the shimmering outlines of the surrounding buildings. On a bronze parapet that runs around the edge of the memorial, names and birthdates of the victims are inscribed. People lay down flowers or talk with muted voices. Some eat lunch under the shade of the 416 oak trees, that, together with the noise of falling water, create the feeling of an urban oasis, a sacred glade disconnected from the activity of the city but also strangely removed from the reality of the event it seeks to commemorate.

Depending on the time of day, the composition of the crowd changes. Around noon, at lunch break, large numbers of white-collar workers disperse from One World Trade Center and the surrounding office buildings. Toward the

end of the day, commuters flood into the *Oculus*, the carcass-like transport hub/shopping mall where the PATH train leaves for Jersey City and beyond. No matter the time of day, however, the memorial is a veritable tourist attraction. There are guided tours moving through the site almost constantly, which either roam around the oak grove or join the lines in front of the 9/11 museum. As people flock to the place that they have seen on television countless times before, they generate a sense of centrality in a city that, due its grid layout, does not possess a center. Selfies are taken and condolences made. Sometimes, there is a moment of uneasiness: what pose is one to strike in front of the twin abyss? The standard formulas of touristic image making (jumping, waving, measuring objects in front of the camera) are inappropriate given the mood. People thus resort to neutral smiling or else gaze thoughtfully at the pools or up at the sky and the One World Trade Center. Reflecting Absence is only the most recent iteration of a long sequence of buildings that attempt to visualize trauma. Before the two pools, another piece of scopic architecture allowed visitors to view the site of Ground Zero.

5.2 THE VIEWING PLATFORM

On December 27, 2001, over two months after the attacks on the World Trade Center, a makeshift viewing platform made from birch plywood and suspended by metal scaffolding was erected at the intersection of Fulton Street and

Broadway, directly adjacent to the site of the recovery operation. Designed by the architectural firm Diller, Scofidio + Renfro (DS+R), the Viewing Platform addressed “the public’s desire for a dignified place to view Ground Zero without impinging on the urgent recovery effort” (“Viewing Platform”). Not unlike the Highline, a more recent example of DS+R’s visual staging of the city, The Viewing Platform was experienced in an itinerant mode. Visitors ascended to the highest point, gazed at Ground Zero, took pictures, and made their way down to the other side. Leading up to the sight of the catastrophe, the ramp injected the visit with a sense of performance, choreographing the gaze of those who subjected themselves to it. For the brief time it existed, the platform allowed for 180-degree viewing of the recovery operation. Quickly, it took on the function of a makeshift memorial, which grew into a fully-fledged attraction, drawing pilgrims and tourists alike, at times obfuscating the distinction between the two (Duke).

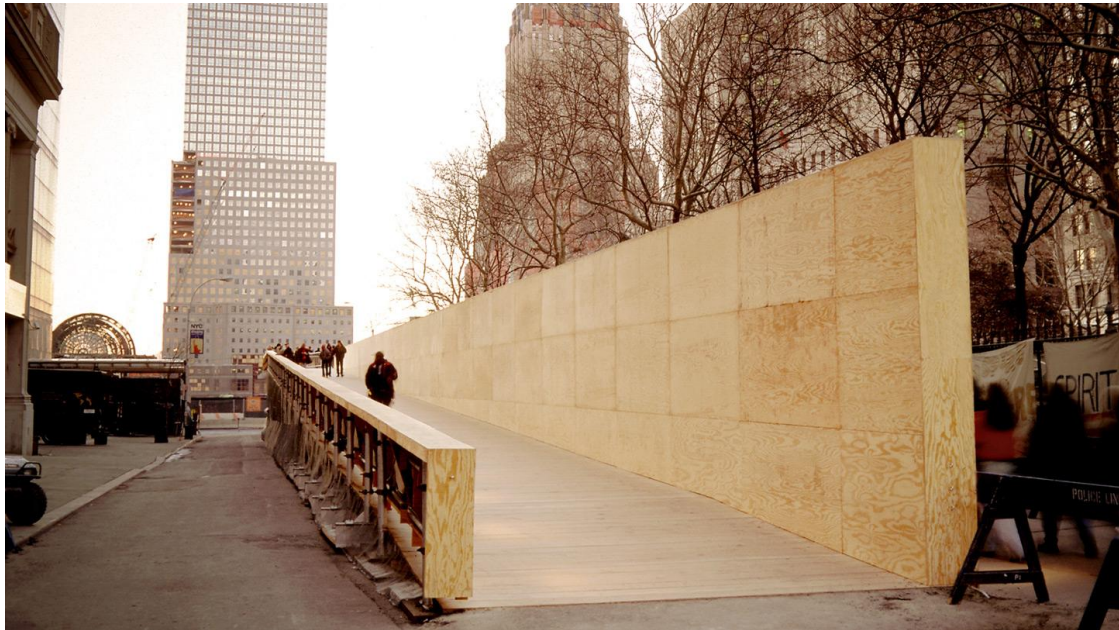


Fig. 19: Viewing Platform. URL: <https://www.rockwellgroup.com/projects/world-trade-center-viewing-platform>

Jean Baudrillard, who gave perhaps the most infamous proclamation on the perceived unreality of 9/11, declared in *The Spirit of Terrorism* that “reality is a principle, and it is this principle that is lost. Reality and fiction are inextricable, and the fascination with the attack is primarily a fascination with the image (both its exultatory and its catastrophic consequences are themselves largely imaginary)” (*The Spirit of Terrorism* 28f.). In response, The Viewing Platform allowed visitors to see Ground Zero with their own eyes, thus reinstating a sense of historical reality that, as Debbie Lisle argues via Baudrillard, was lost in the course of the event: “In this context of media saturation, the viewing platform became crucial in the restoration of the reality principle. If people still didn’t believe what happened on 11 September, they could travel to Ground

Zero and *see for themselves*" (8): A visit to the Viewing Platform, then, allowed visitors to "confirm the 'reality' of the events of 11 September" (5). Indeed, whereas "[n]obody could be sure if what they saw on their screens was real or not" (8), the sight of what was colloquially referred to as "The Pit" (Knox), the mass of debris and the ongoing recovery operation, were undoubtedly "real." In presenting a seemingly immediate view, the Viewing Platform, for Lisle, did not only play a crucial part in reinstating a lost reality principle but also re-established a national narrative, giving every visit a sense of historical significance. As an emergency monument, it integrated a disruptive and seemingly incomprehensible tragedy into a well-rehearsed narrative of continuous national resilience (Lisle 6).

Criticism of the Viewing Platform immediately followed its erection. The main argument was that it encouraged a voyeuristic gaze that degraded a site of national tragedy, turning it into a tourist attraction more akin to a theme park. The impression that Ground Zero, for many still a site of mourning, was quickly subsumed into the realm of commodification was solidified by the appearance of street vendors who sought to capitalize on the platform's popularity: "Lining the seven blocks from the ticket booth to the viewing platform were a variety of hawkers selling framed pictures of the twin towers on fire, bits of soil from the recovery site, and booklets recounting the horror of 11 September in full color" (Lisle 10). Soon, as Lisle recounts, there was a debate around what should be considered an appropriate form of visiting the

platform, a debate that saw supposedly “bad” forms of tourism pitted against “good” or “appropriate” expressions of reverence (11).

After four months, the Viewing Platform was dismantled. The idea of providing an elevated platform that allowed one to gaze at what was below, however, was kept and expanded upon. Ground Zero had become a site inextricably linked to New York’s identity, yet, as the debate around the Viewing Platform shows, the complicated and sometimes contradictory demands of tourism, commemoration and historiography are not easily satisfied. One World Observatory (OWO), as I will show on the following pages, responds to the complicated demands posed by the site in a unique way. Neither catering toward the “desire to touch something real,” as the platform did, nor disavowing the touristic appetite for spectacular sights, it instead opts for the production of an alternate history of New York that is more in accordance with its “brand.” Dissolving the contradiction between “appropriate” forms of public mourning and “inappropriate” touristic consumption, OWO presents a spatialized narrative that erases its complicated heritage and instead allows visitors to experience a palatable, virtual double of New York.

Promising an experience “Above New York City and Beyond all Expectations,” OWO makes use of a wide variety of audiovisual media in order to generate a seamless narrative sequence that unfolds at the same pace as the visitors who move through it. It consists of an elevator called *SkyPod*

whose interior is made up entirely of screens, and the so-called See Forever Theater that obfuscates the boundaries between window and screen. At the top, a special scent is diffused to enhance immersion. The narrative of this journey to the top is one of persistence, optimism and progress, a vision of life in the city unclouded by social strife or political conflict. Eager to generate a reality where the “[t]ough and harsh realities resistant to aesthetic sculpting do not interfere” (Bauman 30), OWO, much like its predecessor Top of the World, pitches an alternative version of New York.

By exploring OWO’s architectural history as well as drawing from fieldwork in 2018, I want to expand existing scholarship. The observation deck is not only an example of how architecture augments its “affective range” (Lavin) through use of audiovisual media that taps into the lucrative markets of global tourism, or an attempt to normalize vertiginous encounters with urban space (Deriu). It is the stories told in this space that fundamentally alter the way in which the city is viewed. This is a change in perception whose consequences are both real and serious.

In terms of structure, I will work both from the outside in and from the ground up. That is, I begin at Ground Zero and investigate how this place, which has been televised so fervently and where political and spatial sightlines converge, celebrates hypervisibility while simultaneously occluding certain relations. I will then situate my reading of Ground Zero in the larger context of scholarly writing about how and when architecture renders itself and the city

(in-)visible. To do this, I refer to the works of Frederic Jameson and Reinhold Martin, and continue a line of argument begun by Kristin Veel and Henriette Steiner. This argument places OWO within a broader historical framework, by comparing it to Roland Barthes' description of the Eiffel Tower. As such it draws attention to the observatory's place in the ongoing spectacularization of the city.

In a second step, I enter OWO as a tourist. Travelling up to the 100th floor of the building, I engage in auto-ethnography. In so doing, I take stock of the ways in which the observatory produces a distinct view of the city, with a special emphasis on how moving images function as a central element in this production. I do not pretend that my experience is in any way typical. On the contrary, I emphasize that each person experiences the observatory differently, depending on their own expectations, experiences and biographies. On the other hand, however, the choice *not* to include a first-hand account of what the Observatory looks and feels like would mean ignoring a key part of its appeal. Indeed, a key aspect of experience economy architecture is that its formal aspects are less important than the way in which it stages experiences.

As Svabo et al. argue

[p]laces, buildings and objects are constituted in complex and heterogeneous interrelations—as are humans. Focusing on the messy interconnectedness and entanglements of practice helps avoid a narrow-

minded subjectivism or falling into the trap of either social or architectural/technological/material determinism. (316f.)

It would be relatively easy to describe OWO using only written accounts or personal vlogs. Yet, the various physical states OWO creates in its visitors would be missing from such descriptions. Coming to terms with this messy interconnectedness requires a “putting oneself out there” and replacing a researcher’s hat with that of the tourist.

5.3 YOU LOOK LIKE A TOURIST

Once a marginal activity of the privileged few, tourism has by now firmly occupied the center, writes Zygmunt Bauman in 1996. The tourist’s symbolic predecessors are the flaneur and the vagabond, but unlike them, they move with only a singular purpose:

[...] the tourist is a conscious and systematic seeker of experience, of a new and different experience, of the experience of difference and novelty—as the joys of the familiar wear off and cease to allure. The tourists want to immerse themselves in a strange and bizarre element (a pleasant feeling, a tickling and rejuvenating feeling, like letting oneself be buffeted by sea waves. (29)

The experiences that the tourist seeks can never be *too* exciting however, or—worst of all—present a real threat to life or limb. Foreign cities might fulfill the tourists desire for novelty, yet the presence of crime, poverty and general

unpleasantness demands a safer, more carefree alternative. It is this gap that the observation deck aims to bridge.

[...] you recognize the favourite tourist haunts by their blatant, ostentatious (if painstakingly groomed) oddity, but also by the profusion of safety cushions and well marked escape routes. In the tourist's world, the strange is tame, domesticated, and no longer frightens; shocks come in a package deal with safety. This makes the world seem infinitely gentle, obedient to the tourist's wishes and whims, ready to oblige [...] made and remade with one purpose in mind: to excite, please and amuse. (29f.)

The observation deck, as I have shown in the previous chapter, was constructed in order to meet this desire of a place that combines all the excitement and vibrancy of the city while excluding all the potentially irritating facets of urban life.

While Bauman inspects touristic desire in a more general sense, John Urry focuses on how tourism is characterized first and foremost by a special way of looking: the tourist gaze. "When we go away" Urry writes, "we look at the environment with interest and curiosity" (1). Urry's definition of a tourist as a subject primarily constituted by the act of looking is immensely helpful in describing my own position as a visitor to the Ground Zero Memorial and One World Trade Center. Urry develops the concept of a touristic gaze in line with Foucault's description of the medical professional's gaze in *The Birth of the Clinic*. The clinical gaze is a way of looking that is trained and conditioned. Shaped by social conventions, education and experience, it is both enabled

and limited by certain assumptions. “[T]he medical gaze was no longer the gaze of any observer,” writes Foucault, “but that of a doctor supported and justified by an institution, that of a doctor endowed with the power of decision and intervention” (Foucault 89). The gaze of the tourist, as Urry then argues, is “as socially organized and systematized as [...] the gaze of the medic” (1). Where Foucault speaks of an archeology of the medical gaze, Urry seeks to develop an archeology of touristic viewing. Indeed, Urry and his co-author Jonas Larsen underline the fact that “[g]azing is a performance that orders, shapes, and classifies, rather than reflects the world” (Urry & Larsen).

Becoming a tourist, Urry argues, also presupposes a moment of departure, a temporary suspension of “established routines and practices of everyday life” (2). To see with the eyes of the tourist means to see differently. Their gaze is drawn towards and

directed to features of landscape and townscape which separate them off from everyday experience. Such aspects are viewed because they are taken to be in some sense out of the ordinary. The viewing of such tourist sights often involves different forms of social patterning, with a much greater sensitivity to visual elements of landscape or townscape than is normally found in everyday life. (3)

The tourist explores a given landscape visually. At the same time, it is this gaze that helps to constitute the landscape as a touristic *sight*.

Following this logic, Ground Zero, with its numerous opportunities to linger and see, offers itself as a prime sight for the tourist. *Loving New York*, a

website that provides sightseeing tips for visitors to the city calls Ground Zero a “must see” that “is no longer a place of terror, but a memorial and a place for quiet reflection” (“Loving New York”). At the time of writing, more than five hundred people have confirmed this assessment by giving Ground Zero a solid 5-star rating. In *Heritage that Hurts*, Joy Sather Wagstaff also notes the productive component of touristic activity, especially when it comes to visiting sites presumed to bear historical significance:

Tragedy—human death and injury, the physical destruction of buildings and landscapes and the psychological and social dissonance that results—is processually transformed into memory and historicity through the social production, construction, performance, and consumption of commemorative sites [...] Commemorative sites are not automatically sacred or otherwise historically important simply because a disastrous event occurred; they are spaces that are continuously negotiated, constructed, and reconstructed into meaningful places through ongoing human action. (Sather-Wagstaff 19f)

At Ground Zero, this human action takes the form of tourists’ scopic activity. As a site, it is constructed through and supported by the tourist gaze, a gaze that in turn is shaped and directed by installations such as OWO.

It is also a place where fundamental questions of representation and perception become virulent, of how events and sites are made visible and are being seen. Like any monument that deals with the memorialization of tragic events, both Ground Zero and OWO are inevitably tasked with what Linda

Watts has called “memorial messaging” (413). As landmarks of rupture they need to find a response to the question of how one might “best convey [...] the fullness of the events unfolding there, and the continued relevance of 9/11 to contemporary life” (413). OWO in particular seems to be directly invested in questions of how the city and the events that shaped it are both represented within and produce a certain *Weltanschauung*. Yet at the same time it is a place where the touristic gaze is potentially frustrated, where an abundance of visual information at times produces confusing and conflicting messages.

5.4 THE GAZE EMBODIED: “DIZZY TO THE POINT OF NAUSEA.”

Urry and others describe tourism as an activity that is essentially scopic. However, OWO’s suturing into a larger history coincides with a mode of spectatorship that goes beyond the optical. Rather than just seeing things, visitors of the observatory are constantly subjected to various psycho-physical states, mostly revolving around notions of vertigo, and feelings of floating or falling. Although it is presented primarily as a *spectacular* experience, with its marketing promising that tourists will *See Forever*, OWO addresses all the senses, and disrupts one’s proprioception. As I will show later on, this is what Roger Caillois calls *ilinx*, “a kind of voluptuous panic upon an otherwise lucid mind” (23). For Caillois, *ilinx*, a term derived from the Greek word for whirlpool, is the defining characteristic of certain types of games. His examples include

the ecstatic spinning of dervishes but also more mundane practices like swinging, sliding, tightrope walking and horseback riding (24f.). However, it took until the Industrial Revolution for *ilinx*-style-attractions to become mass entertainment in the form of rollercoasters and other rides. Their effect is to “turn people pale and dizzy to the point of nausea. They shriek with fright, gasp for breath, and have the terrifying impression of visceral fear and shrinking as if to escape a horrible attack” (26). As I will show, OWO— in less drastic terms— offers a similar form of entertainment.

5.5 TAKING UP AN “IMPOSSIBLE MANDATE”

“The tallest building in any city,” writes John Durham Peters, “the point at which all sightlines converge—usually announces the city’s character, an urban synecdoche” (236). For Barthes, the Eiffel Tower was synonymous with Paris. Colloquially, the *Fernsehturm* in Berlin stands in for the city, as does the Burj Khalifa in Dubai. These buildings are emblems, landmarks—*Wahrzeichen*—and are strongly tied to urban identity. In the case of One World Trade Center (1WTC), the building aspires not only to be a synecdoche for New York, similar to the old Twin Towers, but also to provide a focal point for the history of vision as such. Towering over Ground Zero, i.e. the site that has formed the political vanishing point for US-foreign and domestic policies for almost two decades now, it is reasonable to believe that Steiner/Veel identified 1WTC as a site through which to think about visuality in the 21st century. As they lay out in

Towering Invisibilities: A Cultural-Theoretical Reading of the Eiffel Tower and the One World Trade Center, 1WTC is “implicated in a web of negotiations about how to make something visible: how to ‘name,’ ‘erect,’ ‘create,’ and even ‘show’ at the end of the long 20th century” (414). There is indeed a case to be made that it is not just another tall building, but the point where many of today’s historical and socio-economical sightlines converge. Further, it is where our ability to make sense of the world simply by looking at it, by deciphering that which is visible to us (i.e. the total legibility of the city which Michel de Certeau was still able to enthusiastically theorize on top of the Twin Towers toward the end of the 20th century), is both celebrated and put into question.

In proximity to the former site of Minoru Yamasaki’s Twin Towers, which, after initial rejection because of their sheer scale, quickly rose to *iconic* status, 1WTC is inevitably tasked with reflecting both its architectural heritage and the political violence that destroyed said heritage. At the same time, it has to generate enough revenue to make it economically viable. It is thus tasked with what Time Magazine called an “impossible mandate” that is

to be a public response to 9/11 while providing commercial real estate for its private owners, to be open to its neighbors yet safe to its occupants. It needed to acknowledge the tragedy from which it was born while serving as a triumphant affirmation of the nation’s resilience on the face of it. (Sanburn & Lacayo)

This impossible (or schizophrenic) mandate to be open *and* safe, to be visible *and* concealed, as well as a symbol of patriotic resilience *and* irretrievable loss has haunted the building's design process from the very beginning.

Daniel Libeskind was originally tasked with the design of what at that point was known as the Freedom Tower. The US-American architect was an understandable choice, as Steiner and Veel point out, given that he had already extended the Jewish Museum in Berlin, a project that emphasized his ability to

operate on a level that suggests the capacity of architecture to embody the deepest ethical concerns and create a place in which a shared cultural trauma can be collectively confronted: in other words, his ability to visualize in tangible form that which seems impossible to visualize. (Steiner & Veel 413)

The Jewish Museum in Berlin was tasked, not unlike 1WTC, with a seemingly “impossible mandate” i.e. to reflect on and exhibit the “social, political and cultural history of the Jews in Germany from the fourth century to the present” (“Jewish Museum Berlin”). Libeskind did so by engaging heavily in architectural storytelling. Within the museum “[t]hree underground axial routes” extend from an “Entry Void” (“Jewish Museum Berlin”), with each route telling a different story. One of the three paths leads to a dead end: the Holocaust Tower. The two others go on to the Garden of Exile or to the Stair of Continuity that takes visitors back to the exhibition within the main building. Libeskind's design attempts to translate historical trauma into an architecture

whose symbolism is readily decipherable. It is also influenced by the demands of the experience economy, in that Libeskind constructs an atmosphere where one expects to be emotionally affected by architectural storytelling. When planning the Ground Zero Ensemble, Libeskind sought to install similar narrative devices which in one way or another would reflect the building's traumatic past. In this regard, one of the things he planned was an architectural special effect that was to take place on Wedge of Light Plaza. Every year on September 11, at precisely 8:46 am—the time the first airplane hit—the sun was to illuminate the plaza in such a way that it would not cast any shadows (Wyatt).

Soon after Libeskind published his plans to manipulate the light in this way, criticism arose, followed by arguments about whether or not one should take his description of a shadowless Wedge of Light literally. Apparently, as it turned out, the idea that every year at September 11 there would be figurative and slightly kitschy triumph of light over darkness was made impossible by the presence of the Millennium Hilton, whose shadow would fall upon large parts of the plaza. Eli Attia, Millennium Hilton's architect, publicly cast doubt upon the feasibility of Libeskind's proposal by publishing a so-called shadow plan that showed exactly when and where shadows were to fall (Wyatt). Libeskind responded to this by criticizing his critics' literal reading of the proposal. He had never meant that there would be literally no shadow, but rather that the buildings were to create a sort of luminous ambiance of light and reflections.

The argument about whether or not the Wedge of Light was meant symbolically or figuratively, echoes the underlying uneasiness about the best way to find an architectural image that would correspond to 1WTC's impossible mandate: acknowledge its traumatic past while providing a symbol of future-oriented endurance.

5.6 MEDIA CENTER

Despite its name, most of 1WTC's tenants are not from the field of finance. Instead, the larger part of the floor space is leased to large media firms. Condé Nast, a subsidiary of publishing behemoth Advance Publications, moved its headquarters to the tower, renting over twenty floors to provide space for many of its key brands like *Vogue*, *Bon Appétit* and *The New Yorker*. Other tenants include streaming service Spotify, media and marketing firm Mindshare, and business journal *Inc.* Radio and Television stations like WNJU, WNBC, CNBC and many others make use of the liquid-cooled digital transmitter installed on the 110th floor of the tower, right beneath the spire (Kurz). After the destruction of the Twin Towers, which served as the primary broadcasting site for most on-the-air television and radio transmissions, broadcasting facilities were scattered around the city. Now, 1WTC, as New York's tallest building, has again assumed the role of the city's main broadcasting tower (Soseman). Despite its appearance, the building's spire is

not a singular structure but is comprised of many individual antenna systems serving different functions (Soseman). Seen from ground level, however, these functions are invisible, as they disappear behind the spire's heavy-handed symbolism.

For Steiner/Veel this antenna has special implications. Like the Eiffel Tower, whose tourist-icon banality masks its secondary function as an important communications array, 1WTC's massive antenna makes the building a unique site "that lingers, and perhaps oscillates, between the symbolic and the functional" (412). In Libeskind's earliest designs, the spire was conceived as a symbolic link between 1WTC and the arm of the Statue of Liberty. "In this way," as Steiner and Veel point out, "it would have functionally joined that which is so strikingly visible (the monumental tower) to that which is invisible (the wireless communication), allowing the antenna to be interpreted as a natural extension of U.S. ideologies" (413). The antenna also contributed to the overall height of the building: 1776 feet tall, which is also the year of US-American Independence. Additionally, an array of LEDs illuminates the spire after dark. For Steiner and Veel, this beam of light makes "the height of the tower visible to the surroundings, like a lighthouse warning airplane flying at low altitude" and is "equally reminiscent of the panoptic kind of watchtower that surveys its surroundings" (414). For Steiner and Veel, 1WTC exemplifies how "material form and cultural meaning may interrelate in highly complex and often paradoxical ways" (410). On the one hand, 1WTC is an extremely

visible, *iconic* landmark that can be seen from miles away, while on the other, this extreme visibility obscures some of its more pragmatic functions. With 1WTC, the symbolic and functional, the representational and the abstract, become hard to distinguish. What 1WTC then challenges is a clear-cut line between the visible and the invisible. Instead, doing away with this dichotomy, Steiner/Veel suggest that the building exists on a “spectrum of invisibilities” (412).

5.7 HIDING IN PLAIN SITE: MIRROR FAÇADE

Steiner/Veel see the logic of revelation and concealment as a defining principle of 1WTC in particular, and symptomatic of a post-9/11 order of visibility in general. It continues in the building’s curtain wall façade, which consists of large panels of reinforced mirror-coated glass, arranged in a pattern of interlocking triangles. The coating makes the appearance of the building fluctuate: at certain times it produces a crisp reflection of the sky and the surrounding area; but at others, when the sun is right, it appears completely translucent. The effect of the façade, as one reads on the homepage of Skidmore, Owing and Merrill (SOM), the firm responsible for the tower’s design, “is that of a crystalline form that captures an ever-evolving display of refracted light. As the sun moves through the sky or we move around the tower, the surfaces appear like a kaleidoscope, and will change throughout the day as

light and weather conditions change” (“One World Trade Center Project Portfolio”).

A crystalline form, a kaleidoscope, an ever-changing display. SOM’s description of 1WTC is ripe with optical analogies, repeatedly underlining its *iconic* status while also affirming its unique position next to the 9/11 memorial: “One World Trade Center [...] acknowledges the adjacent memorial. While the memorial is carved out of the earth One World Trade Center speaks about the future and hope as it rises upward in a faceted form filled with, and reflecting, light” (“One World Trade Center Project Portfolio”). SOM describes 1WTC as a sight to behold, something to look at: a beacon or a lighthouse that signals toward the future and draws attention away from the past. Even though its structure is massive, solid, and fortified, its appearance is supposed to be airy and mirage-like. On one occasion, its façade was called “the most highly visible façade on the planet” (“One World Trade Center Project Portfolio”). But again, one can see how this highly visible façade and its celebration of visibility at the same time produce optical inaccessibility.

Writing about the Westin Bonaventure Hotel in Downtown Los Angeles, Frederic Jameson questions the validity of the set of metaphors that a mirroring façade might evoke, and that are so enthusiastically repeated by the architects of SOM. Clad in highly reflective mirrors, the Bonaventure’s façade repels and redirects the gaze. Jameson asserts that when you look at the building, it is impossible to actually *see* it; rather, you inevitably end up looking

at a number of reflections, perceiving “only the distorted images of everything that surrounds it” (*The Cultural Turn* 13). In a way, Jameson writes, mirroring façades seem to mimic “those reflective sunglasses which make it impossible for your interlocutor to see your own eyes” (13).³⁷

While Jameson writes about postmodern architecture of the 1980s, Reinhold Martin concerns himself with the ghostly return of its formal vocabulary, offering his own view on mirroring architecture. Taking Philip Johnson’s Pennzoil Place in Houston, Texas as his example, Martin describes how, instead of reflecting its immediate surroundings, the mirrored façade, due to the positioning of its corners, primarily mirrors itself:

Like a diagram of a recursive feedback loop, Pennzoil reflects itself and only itself in its doubled-up volumes, producing a time-space that is neither interior nor exterior, neither here nor there, neither this nor that, neither now nor then. (109)

For Jameson, the Bonaventure’s mirrored façade conceals a potential inside. The façade shielded the building from onlookers by diverting and distorting their gaze, thus realizing what Jameson regarded as the building’s ultimate aspiration: to function like a mini-city that exists separately from the actual city that surrounds it. Martin, on the other hand, argues that the mirror façade does not so much hide the inside of the building but “renders the outer world—the city—invisible” (114) by engaging in a feedback loop. Thus the mirrored façade

³⁷ For a more complicated and detailed history of mirrors see Melchior-Bonnet.

stands not so much for a moment of reflection but an ongoing self-referentiality and total disregard for spatial context. As the writings of Jameson and Martin show the claim of transparency put forth by SOM is not very convincing. Generally, in order to come to terms with “the conditions for visuality that emerge in post-9/11 culture” (412), engaging with its outside does take one only so far. I argue, therefore, that this engagement does not take place outside the building but *within* it.

A couple of months after Condé Nast—1WTC’s first and most important tenant—moved in at the end of 2014, the building opened its gates to visitors. Planned as a tourist magnet and a substantial source of revenue, 1WTC draws a large number of visitors every year.³⁸ Its marketing claim—“See Forever”—sounds like a promise. So, on the one hand we have the “spectrum of invisibilities” that Steiner and Veel regard as characteristic of a post-9/11 visual order, and on the other, we have a promise of limitless visibility.

5.8 STANDING LIKE ONE DAZED

One World Observatory opened to the public in 2015. It takes the idea of providing a vantage point from which a site can conveniently be viewed to the extreme. Located on the 100th to 102nd floors of 1WTC, the tallest building of

³⁸ A New York Times article quotes that in 2015/16 about two million people visited the One World Trade Observatory (Bagli).

the Western hemisphere, the observatory promotes itself as a place where one is invited to “See Forever” (“One World Observatory Project Portfolio”), and as a site where the gaze is extended indefinitely and in all directions. In my experience as a visitor, however, the regimes that govern OWO are much more complicated than this marketing of absolute vision might suggest. Contrary to the total visibility implied in the title—*One World* Observatory—the view from the tower is carefully curated and filtered through a wide range of different audiovisual and—most recently—olfactory media. Its story of the city is rigid, and unfolds as one moves along a predetermined, heavily regulated path. Or, as Richard DeMarco, principal of MADGI, the firm tasked with overseeing the design of OWO put it in an interview: “It’s a machine. You come in. You experience. You go through it. You come out” (Jacobs).

I visited OWO on a Friday afternoon in mid-September 2018, which, according to one of the employees—or “ambassadors” in the observatory’s nomenclature—was already the slow season as far as tourism goes. He told me that the space is usually so crowded that people have to “use their elbows” to ascertain a spot at one of the many windows. This was not the case at all during my visit. During the 90 minutes I spent at the observatory, there were no more than forty people present at all times. This made me wonder whether the plan that the observatory would eventually make up one quarter of 1WTC’s total revenue actually came to fruition (Brown). A standard ticket was \$35, but there are more expensive options such as the All-Inclusive pass which for \$55

includes things like the SkyView Channel (more on that later), a \$15 voucher for the restaurant and/or gift shop, and priority access, i.e. skipping the line. There even exists a VIP Tour offered exclusively to MasterCard owners for \$65. To put these numbers into perspective: in 2018 New York city's minimum wage was \$13 per hour for big and \$12 per hour for small employers (State of New York). The price of a ticket thus represents about 3 working hours for someone on a minimum wage job in New York. This not only sheds some light on the intended audience for OWO (people with disposable income) but also signals a certain confidence that the attraction is able to compete with attractions within a similar price range such as the Museum of Modern Art (\$25).

There was a long line in front of the 9/11-museum, as well as a great number of people who came to see the memorial itself, depositing flowers around the twin pools, crying, and taking pictures of themselves. 9/11's seventeenth anniversary was just a few days away. Weather conditions were favorable for viewing, with only a slightly overcast sky and no fog to speak of. Temperatures outside hovered around 23 degrees Celsius, although it felt much warmer due to an almost tropical 91% humidity. Inside the observatory, of course, none of this could be felt. The Central Chiller Plant, a monstrous A/C-apparatus that sits below the memorial museum, circulating 113,000 liters of Hudson-sourced river water every minute, steadily kept the entire complex (including the memorial museum and the 1WTC transport hub) at a

temperature slightly too cold for comfort. Southwards, one could see as far as the Verrazano-Narrows bridge and far down the Hudson river in the other direction. I could see the financial district, Chinatown, and a bit further on, the Empire State Building. Some people have claimed that it is even possible to see the curvature of the earth from up here (or, more accurately, the curved line of the horizon). In my experience this was not the case. The sheer fact however that one expects to see the curvature of the earth shows how potent the mythical claims of unlimited visibility are. In a place where one supposedly can *See Forever*, the sudden suspension of optical laws does not seem that unlikely.

Outside, a red helicopter was soundlessly circling around the building. It hovered for a while before proceeding in the direction of Midtown Manhattan only to re-appear about twenty minutes later. As I found out afterwards, the helicopter belonged to *Liberty Helicopters*, one of the many operators that offer aerial sightseeing around the city. OWO, it seems, was not the only enterprise that seeks to profit from the desire to see the city from above. In a way, the helicopter outside mocks OWO's visitors: a view that is simultaneously elevated *and* mobile might ultimately be superior to the fixed position of the observatory.

People were on their phones a lot. Some talked and/or filmed the entire experience from start to finish. Apparently, they wanted to immediately broadcast this extraordinary experience ("you cannot *believe* where I am right

now”). Some used apps like Facetime or Skype not only to transmit their voices but also to provide live video evidence—a move that seems appropriate, since it is quite hard to verbally communicate the sensation of being that high up and looking down on Manhattan.

Since July 2019, a custom scent is diffused throughout the observatory via the A/C system. Some commentators have noted that the true purpose of the scent, which combines the smell of pine trees with a hint of citrus, is aimed at recreating the smell of New York State’s flora while simultaneously creating an olfactory equivalent of the building’s slick design, and thus chase away the memory of September 11: “The scent was made to resemble something that does not exist at the top of one of the tallest buildings in the world: trees, all native to New York state, including beeches, mountain ashes and red maples. It has some citrusy notes, for freshness. And it has a name: ‘One World’” (Barron).

The scent is decisively “Middle-C,” i.e. it was to be as centered and grounded as the middle key on a piano: an unobtrusive, discrete smell enhancing an unobtrusive interior. There were many acoustical set pieces during the ascent, some of which sounded as if they were taken directly from a Marvel movie, signaling a special kind of pathos-inducing, 21st-century *epicness*. But there was nothing in the observatory itself. Perhaps this is to ensure the sublimity of the view. Some people even whispered as if they were

in a museum. Lastly, there is a gift shop that sells bottled water, magnets and true to scale replicas of 1WTC made from polished glass.

5.9 WALK-IN TOURIST GUIDE

Every half an hour or so, one of the ambassadors steps inside a giant ring made of screens called the CityPulse. Through a wearable device on his wrist, he is able to control the screen's content by contorting his body. He lets the audience choose a topic—say, where to eat cheaply in Manhattan—and then conjures up the relevant information via yoga-like stances. Other segments available through the CityPulse concern money and finance in New York, arts and culture, the city's geography and so on. It can also zoom in on certain buildings, explain their function, how they relate to their surroundings, and their opening hours. The ambassador provides further information if needed. Then you can step to one of the windows and see how you would get there on foot, marking possible routes to your destination. From my experience, the ambassadors take their role as spokespeople for New York City very seriously, patiently answering every request and readily sharing semi-insider information, e.g. that you can visit MoMA for free every Friday from 4 to 8pm and should arrive early to secure a good place in the line.

After having spent some time within the observatory you should be spatially orientated and ready to traverse the complexity of the city very much

in the same way a “native” New Yorker would. Seeing Manhattan from above allows one to internalize its basic topography, the grid layout, the downtown/uptown directional scheme and to construct a cognitive map of the place. You get to know where the Statue of Liberty is, JFK airport, Brooklyn Bridge, the five Burroughs, and how to order at a Deli. It’s like Google Earth but instead of an image stitched together from various satellites, in which cities appear strangely devoid of human activity, OWO allows you to observe the drama *as it unfolds*. Ships go up and down the Hudson and to and from the Jersey Shore. Massive cruise liners are visible in the distance. There is also a surprising amount of helicopter traffic as well as police cars, yellow cabs, and the occasional limousine. Pedestrians are almost invisible, however, and register only in a sort of abstract, pigmentary movement.

5.10 ENLIGHTENING PASSAGE

Tourists seek to quickly familiarize themselves with the peculiarities of an unknown terrain. OWO responds to this desire by configuring itself like a walk-in tourist guide, where the relevant information is presented not as words on a page but a spatial arrangement. Proceeding through the observatory, one comes to know everything one needs to about New York. In *Vatican to Vegas*, Norman M. Klein traces the history of such scripted spaces back to medieval labyrinths that presented

condensed pilgrimages, with very straightforward rules, to make the passage enlightening—intellectual challenges, not merely theatricalized walks [...] a very compact journey, more like walking through edited moments. Like an abbreviated kingdom tiny enough to slip into your pocket, the labyrinth was a compressed version of a vast pilgrimage. It was a kit, a pocket reliquary; a bag of relics for armchair tourist. (100f.)

Unfolding its own logic of a didactic labyrinth, OWO mediates the city in a way that makes it all appear comprehensible, and like its predecessors it delivers an ideological story along the way. “[I]n the garden labyrinth at Versailles (1667),” as Norman Klein writes, “paths through the maze were pre-assigned according to social rank. For the nobility, the allegory led to *gloire*, a military myth that honored feudal rank. For the middle class, a separate route taught honesty, to know your place on behalf of the greater order” (105). Whereas the labyrinth at Versailles reassured the nobility and middle classes of their place within the hierarchy, OWO re-affirms the status of its visitors as consumers of the city as spectacle. In a variant of Althusserian interpellation, the observatory assigns everyone a tourist subject position, as it leads them along their preordained path, sustaining “the myth of free will in a world of absolute predestination [...] carefully controlled, not open-ended really” (106).

As mentioned in the second chapter, Michel de Certeau visited the Twin Towers’ Top of the World Observation deck sometime during the eighties and likened the experience to being transformed into a “solar eye,” feeling as if he was “looking down like a god” (103). In comparison, my experience felt

quotidian—a little dull, even. For a number of reasons, including the distraction of people talking on their phones, the whole scenario reminded me of the nondescript waiting areas of large train stations or airports that Marc Augé speaks of. After the barrage of entertainment that accompanied my ascent to the top, the headline experience was anticlimactic. There was not much else to do besides promenade along the windows or rest one's legs on a bench. It was impossible to sit down and look outside, a problem that Platner, as aforementioned, considered in detail when designing Top of the World's benches. Contemplation is thus limited by individual physical endurance. Making the effort to step right next to one of the windows and looking straight down, I could see the 9/11 memorial pools below. The crowds moving around them appeared to be strangely immobilized, or at least moving much more slowly, like some colorful, high-viscosity gel.

One enters the observatory through a lobby that looks out on West Street. There are two lines: one for regular tickets, and one for VIP access at about double the price, which allows visitors to bypass the line entirely. Similar to the Oculus transport hub to which 1WTC is connected via an underground walkway, the walls of the Lobby are covered in Italian Carrara marble. This is a luxurious yet somewhat bland design choice that, together with the serifless font used throughout and the glass curtain wall that separates the lobby from the plaza, gives the impression of an office entrance.

After buying a so-called “SkyPass” (the first iteration in a long sequence of celestial branding) at the steep price of \$41, one proceeds downwards via a pair of escalators and is guided towards an illuminated archway bearing the “See-Forever” slogan. This opens on to an airport-style security check-in complete with metal detector and x-ray scan. The first thing one then sees is the Global Visitors Center: an enormous screen that supposedly displays real time information about the number and nationality of everyone who bought a ticket. This information is visualized as a global heat map with the countries producing the most visitors that day glowing an ominous red. This map, which makes tourism look like the spread of a pandemic, suggests an affinity between two privileged views: the one from above, which you are about to experience, and the one produced by data visualization.

The co-presence of not one but two technologies of control, i.e. the airport-style security screenings and check-in procedure together with the Global Visitors Center, underlines the twofold logic of observation within OWO. Not only are visitors encouraged to See Forever, to gain knowledge by looking, but they are also, without any subtlety, made aware of the fact that they themselves are being inspected closely, that their movements are being monitored and that the path is already laid out for them. Up until this point, checking into the observatory is not so different from checking into the securitized space of the airport. Once you have purchased your ticket, your luggage is scanned for dangerous goods and your body passes through a metal

detector. And much like at the airport, your body is being guided constantly after passing that threshold, with either signs, belt-barriers or ambassadors pointing out when to stop and where to go.

A first narrative section follows this prelude, whose function is to provide a sense of foundation. Visitors are herded through a tunnel like structure. The wall on the left hand side consists of an array of stylized mirroring triangles. These mirrors both reflect and optically fragment the opposite wall: a mosaic of screens where construction workers, foremen, investors and all sorts of people involved in the construction process of 1WTC give testimony about the sense of endurance and achievement that comes from working on a project like this. This is the first and also the last time that 9/11 is mentioned. By juxtaposing these two forms, isosceles triangles on the one side, and square-edged cubes on the other, OWO subtly introduces the two formal principles that define the building's architecture as a whole. Next, proceeding through another cave covered with faux bedrock (I overheard many visitors commenting on the fact that the 1WTC is apparently built upon a foundation of plastic), one arrives at the SkyPod Elevator Lobby, which is also one of the observatory's main attractions.

5.11 ELEVATOR OUT OF TIME

While ascending, an array of nine 57-inch high-definition monitors supported by a 5.1 surround-sound system shows a computer generated time-lapse of the history of New York, starting at the year 1500. It presents the presumably uninhabited landscape of Manhattan Island, the first Western settlements, increasing urbanization, and the first skyscrapers etc. The AV-system from which this media is played is linked directly to the elevator controls, so that elevator and media playback speed remain synchronized throughout. The distance the elevator covers on the vertical axis (ca. 368 meters) is translated into a 500-year time span on the temporal axis. Local history as it is shown here has both a definitive point of origin—the year 1500—and a preliminary endpoint: 2014, the year in which 1WTC was completed. Everything in between is a tale of continuous progress, symbolized by the ever-growing vertical expanse of the city, which begins to look like time-lapse footage of mushroom growth. Sound effects enhance the illusion of travelling upwards: as one ascends, the ambient noise of the city recedes and is replaced by gusts of wind and ultimately the clinking of steel and equipment that accompanied the construction of 1WTC itself. The further you ascend, the slower the growth becomes, until at some point, shortly before you exit, the entire city seems to exist in a state of homeostasis, as if 1WTC marks its completion, after which nothing will change. The elevator ride keeps the promise that OWO allows one

to See Forever—to combine the sense of sight with the sensation of time passing.

Notably, this way of depicting the city as an ever-growing entity has some precedents in film history. In his article *Harbor, Architecture, Film* published in a 2009 anthology on industrial film, Floris Paalman writes briefly about a 1928 feature-length documentary produced by the municipality of Rotterdam called *De Stad Die Nooit Rust (The City that Never Rests)*:

The film starts with the historical growth of Rotterdam, using maps and animation, followed by an overview of the city and the harbor. The film is a whirlpool of movement, with rushing traffic, including trains, cars, trams, trucks, airplanes, and ships, while the camera itself is mounted on vehicles. The harbor gets special attention and is shown as a highly dynamic city in itself with ‘moving architecture’—vessels that are state of the art in terms of industrial design and engineering, and barges that turn the harbor into a Waterstad. (396)

In *The City that Never Rests*, urban expansion is rendered in the form of an aerial animated map, with new districts drawn in as the years pass by. It explicitly promotes trade as the motor for urban development. Intercut with the animated elements are views of the harbor itself and the many activities that take place within it. This too seems like a late realization of Milton Glaser’s idea to show New York “evolving from farmland to residential area to the way it exists today” (“Letter to Platner, November 29, 1972”).

The SkyPod elevator shows New York, a city like Rotterdam that grew around maritime trade, in a similar spirit of capitalist growth and rapid expansion. But whereas *The City that Never Rests* worked with filmic techniques like editing and montage as well as hand drawn animation in order to present a scopic continuity between the individual movements happening within the city and the overall idea of growth and prosperity, the computer generated imagery of the SkyPod elevator synthesizes these elements. It is as if SkyPod seeks to eliminate the distance between film and spectator in order to fully ingrain the idea that a city's essence lies in its continuous expansion. The movement of the city is transferred, then, to the body of the spectator itself, as the elevator makes its way up to the top at high-speed. As the city around you rises, you also rise.

Going up therefore *feels* funny, as SkyPod fuses together cinematic and kinesthetic sensations in a rollercoaster ride of urbanity. Inside the cabin one registers the speed of its movement, and experiences the typical ear popping caused by the swift change in barometric pressure. However, these physical reactions do not correspond with the fantastical 3D-landscape proliferating "outside" the cabin. Indeed, it feels as if the movement suggested by the animation and the movement of the SkyPod are not entirely in synch. This causes a sense of motion sickness and spatio-temporal disorientation, not unlike that which is experienced when wearing a VR-headset. Your entire body

is strapped into this strange device in which not only the images are moving, but so too is the cinema itself as well as your body within it.

Scott C. Richmond argues that this sort of “proprioceptive aesthetics [...] lies at the heart of the cinema as an aesthetic medium and as a technical system—in both its historical continuity and its contemporary uses” (6). Proprioception refers to the awareness of one’s body in space. It relies on a complex interplay between several physiological structures such as the cochlea—the snail shaped part of the inner ear that provides a sense of rotation and linear acceleration by detecting the movement of tiny calcium grains that travel within it. Richmond expands this physiological definition of proprioception by including a sense of self-perception: one’s own position in the world, which in turn can be modulated by cinema. With regards to Alfonso Cuarón’s *Gravity* he writes that:

I feel myself moving through space; my body at rest in my seat in the theater, becomes an object of sensorial involvement, even as I am simultaneously and intensively enmeshed in onscreen space. (8)

The SkyPod takes the cinema’s ability to disturb proprioception to the extreme. The elevator is really travelling upwards, yet there is a disconnect between what the screens show to be happening (an elevator travelling through time and space) and the reality of the situation (an elevator travelling within a core of reinforced concrete). By making use of cinema’s capacity to disturb one’s sense of proprioception, and coupling it with the logic of the

rollercoaster, the SkyPod elevator produces a profound sense of disorientation as it switches out the real New York with its virtual double. This dizziness is not an unwanted by-product of the SkyPod Experience, but rather its main purpose.

When walking through a major metropolis such as New York, one knows that the surrounding cityscape is not simply the result of extended periods of population growth, economic and technological development, financial investment and so on, but also zoning laws, topological features, architectural trends, infrastructural necessities and so on. What SkyPod does is turn this abstract knowledge into a visceral experience. However, the viscosity of the experience hinders a more critical engagement with the version of New York that one sees on screen. For example, SkyPod portrays Manhattan island before the arrival of Dutch colonial settlers as an uninhabited *terra nullius*, when in fact it was actually part of Lenapehoking, the populated territory of the Native American Lenape tribe. Further, the tragedy that seems so painfully present on the outside at the 9/11 memorial is only an afterthought. That is, the old World Trade Center appears only briefly and in ghostly fashion, like an already faded memory.

5.12 THE SEE FOREVER THEATER

Stepping out of the elevator, visitors are led into yet another cinematic situation, the See Forever Theater. Standing next to a railing one gets to see a short, collage-like film where vignettes and snippets of New York life pass by in quick succession. This is accompanied by a hymnic yet somewhat generic soundtrack mixing string harmonics, marimba tunes and the drone that New York constantly generates. The content itself is projected on a reflective surface that is 24 meters wide and 3 meters tall, and is made of individual rectangles that are in constant motion. According to Associates in Media Engineering, Inc., the firm responsible for the technical implementation of the See Forever Theater, the projection's setup is very complex, involving a total of 28 individual projector mappings that have to be constantly adjusted to fit the moving pieces ("One World Observatory Project Portfolio"). The result is a rapidly cut bombardment of pure urbanity. Subway cars and bicycle drivers zip by, steam rises from underground grates, children play in fountains, jostling intersections are shown either in slow motion or time-lapse, and aerial views alternate with night-time views of neon-soaked avenues. The film portrays the course of a single day from dusk to dawn; there are murals, fire hydrants, a subway map, street and store signs—some written in Chinese characters—people sitting calmly on stairs in front of a brownstone building in true New York fashion, or basketball players throwing hoops at a local park. Toward the

end, the film shifts registers, changing to a dada-like cutout aesthetic, as if someone had taken a pair of scissors to the urban fabric, cut it all apart and shuffled the fragments. The chimney of an ocean steamer pops up next to a rooftop water tower, which is next to the famous clock in the main hall of Grand Central Terminal, gesturing vaguely towards “some indefinable nostalgic past, an eternal 1930s” (*The Cultural Turn* 9). All of this and more, the film seems to say, is happening right now in the great metropolis.

Portraying the city as a chaotic, ever-changing collage is part of a long tradition, dating back to the earliest examples of filmic depictions of urban space. Laura Frahm explains as much with regards to the city-films of the 1910s and 20s:

What is notable about the early experiments conducted in order to portray the city in film is the fact that the camera is always set up where all kinds of movements intersect: urban plazas with throngs of people, the chaos of a junction where tramlines, cabs and carriages meet, crowded avenues surrounded by all the signs of the metropolis: shop windows, neon signs, glittering lights. (199; my translation)

These early city films all imply that it is film and film only, as a medium defined by inherent motion, that is able to adequately represent the inherent complexity and manifold movements of the city. And yet, at the same time, it is also able to reflect on the limits of such representations (204). The fact that the *See Forever Theater*, knowingly or unknowingly, invokes the aesthetic of the early city film, by repeating many of the tropes that Frahm mentions is

telling, insofar as it situates the observatory within a distinctly filmic tradition of making the metropolis visible. With regards to the city films of the 1920s, namely Dziga Vertov's *Man with a Movie Camera* (1929) and Walter Ruttmann's *Berlin. Die Sinfonie einer Großstadt* (1927), Frahm notes how these films both depict and construct the dynamism of urban modernity. In *Man with a Movie Camera* the eponymous cameraman is even inscribed into the fabric of the cityscapes he depicts, thus revealing how the act of filming produces the cityscape in the first place. This once again underlines the inherent link between film and urbanity.

Complexity, dynamism, and chaotic and frantic movements, then, are not inherent properties of the city but rather the result of a representational choice. In *Man with a Movie Camera*, filmed in Kiev, Moscow and Odessa, Vertov defines the city by a myriad of simultaneous production and consumption processes—a totality that only the camera is able to perceive. Soap bars and cigarettes are packaged, calls routed, blades sharpened—all at the same time. The See Forever Theater celebrates the same kind of complexity and simultaneity, portraying the city as a “space genuinely in motion, permeated by dynamism, and ever changing.” (Frahm 15)

The most revealing aspect of The See Forever Theater is how the designers chose to conclude the attraction. When the two and a half minute film ends, the screen becomes a curtain which is lifted to reveal the view from the 102nd floor windows. So here, in a grand finale, one is confronted with what

is staged as the *actual* view on New York—the main event and visual carrot that has been dangling in front of the visitors from the moment they entered. This feature suggests a direct comparison between the filmic view on the city and what is being staged as the actual view. Other than generating a moment of shock and surprise (some people cheered or applauded this sudden revelation) it is as if OWO, after recognizing the unique capacity of the moving image to depict the metropolis, presents itself as an even more potent viewing device, a post-cinematic “Medium der Sichtbarmachung von städtischer Bewegung” (Frahm 240) that ultimately pretends to have surpassed film in its ability to depict urban life. In this moment, one clearly recognizes the sort of de-essentialization of the filmic experience that Francesco Casetti speaks of when he describes the spilling over of moving images into other contexts. It is as if the underlying principles of early city films have developed a life of their own within OWO, contributing much to a piece of architecture that not only reflects or represents movement but is in itself genuinely moved.

5.13 WINDOWS ON THE WORLD / CURTAINS ON THE WORLD

The revelatory gesture inherent in the lifting of the curtain implies a hierarchy between the mediated representations of the city (SkyPod, See Forever Theater) and the seemingly unmediated view from the large windows. Drawing a curtain is a deeply ambivalent act, evoking both the commencement of an

illusion—think cinema, opera, theater—or its suspension, as unveiling something is often synonymous with revealing its essence or truth. “To draw a curtain can mean two apparently contradictory things,” writes Kathryn Murphy with regards to paintings like Johannes Vermeer’s *The Art of Painting*, or Adriaen van der Spelt’s *Trompe-l’Oeil Still Life with a Flower Garland and a Curtain*:

to pull it aside to reveal what it had concealed, and to pull it in front of an object in order to hide it. To draw – and to paint – a curtain is thus both to cover and discover [...] The curtain is at once what must be withdrawn to see the truth; and what must be looked at to reveal it.
(Murphy)

Murphy argues that the painted curtains of Vermeer or van der Spelt “lead the viewer to consider what painting can reveal or conceal” (Murphy). In the case of the *See Forever Theater*, the curtain is used for dramatic effect. As in a magic trick, the city, which has been completely out of view for the entirety of the experience, abruptly appears again before the eyes. Visitors react as if this was a surprise, cheering and applauding. In some ways, the lifting of the curtain marks the endpoint of an experiential loop that began on street level. Before entering 1WTC, you looked at it its façade from below, wondering perhaps what the view from above must be like. Now, since you have gone up there, you get the chance to see from the inside out. Yet, immediately after the curtain has been lifted there is a sense of disappointment. The view simply seems less spectacular and certainly much more static than the projection that

preceded it. It is therefore not surprising that at this point the ambassadors offer iPads at the rental price of \$15, which will augment the view by displaying background information about key landmarks in real time. This gesture reveals the economic imperative that governs the observatory, while underlining the suspicion that an unmediated view can only show you so much.

What does one see after the curtain has been lifted? First of all, one sees windows—many of them—and behind those windows the expanse of New York City. This direct juxtaposition of the cinematic screen and the window puts into proximity two distinct yet related technologies of speculative knowledge—or two “scopic regimes” to use Martin Jay’s term. Here, the notion of Cartesian Perspectivalism inherent in the literal window on the world that opens up to urban space is juxtaposed with the filmic depiction of said space, where the urban experience is presented as a cheerfully chaotic co-existence of forms and visual registers. Returning once more to the categories of observation, speculation and spectacle I outlined in the introduction, the lifting of the curtains followed by the immediate offer to switch the cinema screen for a tablet marks the shift from one scopic regime to another. The See Forever Theater, then, is firmly lodged in the logic of the spectacle. The Theater invites visitors to passively consume a filmic representation of New York whereas the lifting of the curtain afterwards suggests that this is the real view. However, it is constantly suggested that this view is somewhat interchangeable, or that the

mediated version of New York might actually be more interesting than its “real” counterpart outside.

Within the larger dramaturgy of OWO, the immobility of the spectators also serves a pragmatic purpose. As the space at the top can only take so many people at once, careful control of the influx of the visitors is necessary. After the film is over, an ambassador shows up to guide people into the central viewing area where the giftshop is also located.

Lastly, there was a notable desire to re-establish all sorts of relations that went missing in the upward journey. One of the rituals in places such as this is making out one’s places of residence, be it temporary (hotel, hostel) or permanent (apartment, house, city block). After that, one usually looks for key landmarks, i.e. the Statue of Liberty, Empire State Building, the Brooklyn Bridge etc., engaging in a broader, less private mode of localization. On top of the world, everybody becomes a mapmaker. The fact that so many people took the opportunity to call someone suggests that this desire to gauge *where one stands* is not restricted to spatial terms. After all, by communicating with family and friends, one is re-assured that not only networks of space but one’s emotional topography remain intact—even when in a liminal space such as this.

5.14 A POLYPHONY OF PLEASURES

The path to the OneDine restaurant, the most exclusive of the three dining options available, is flanked by a large glass display in which all sorts of optical instruments and objects embed the observatory within a history of vision. Here, one can find in a seemingly random arrangement optical items largely from the 19th and 20th centuries: binoculars and telescopes, the color chart from Goethe's *Farbenlehre*, magnifying glasses, anatomical drawings of the eye and the optical nerve, star maps, cameras, a praxinoskope etc. It was as if somebody had made it their mission to collect all of the objects Jonathan Crary mentions in *Techniques of the Observer*. Primarily decorative in its function and presumably placed there to provide an entertaining distraction to OneDine patrons waiting to be seated, this display presents a weird *mise en abyme*, and offers a lucid insight into its own genealogy. In short, it presents OWO as the culmination of all things optical. A similar array of objects, consisting of a number of brass-telescopes, a polaroid camera, a sextant and even an anatomical model of the human eye, are placed above the One Mix Bar. Again, one recognizes the relentlessness of theming. Everything one encounters here alludes to the observatory's brand and its enthusiastic slogan: See Forever.

Consuming the view while at the same time consuming an expensive meal, such as a \$34 Long Island Duck Breast or a \$32 Grilled Octopus, is presented as the ultimate luxury. Both the menus of One Dine Restaurant and

One Mix Bar, which serves small plates alongside cocktails, also speak of an attempt to encapsulate the culinary diversity of New York by serving meals that supposedly correspond to the city's five boroughs. The food in this case functions like a medium, programmed to communicate a special sense of New-York-ness, revealing once more the observatory's ambition to serve as a virtual double of the actual city. For Roland Barthes, the presence of a restaurant atop Eiffel Tower provided a sense of comfort by countering the sublime view with the most trivial of acts: eating. It is this juxtaposition of the extraordinary and the quotidian that for Barthes generates a distinct sense of comfort and also communicates a sense of autarchy: "the Tower can live on itself: one can dream there, eat there, observe there, understand there, marvel there, shop there [...] one can feel oneself cut off from the world and yet the owner of a world" (250). One World Observatory is driven by the same ambition to provide a fully contained experience. Everything one might experience while actually traversing the city is recreated in detail. One does not need to go to Queens to *consume* Queens as within OWO's dining options, entire boroughs are reduced to stereotypical dishes, to culinary *spectacles*. Once more it comes to show that what the observation decks of Eiffel Tower and 1WTC want to generate is a sense of being close to the city, of being *in the midst of it*, while watching it from a distant, carefully removed from its less pleasant components.

Before the experience of OWO concludes, the SkyPod produces one final hallucination. Descending, one does not, as could be expected, go

backwards in time. Instead, the elevator simulates exiting the building entirely, showing, in the same animated rendering style as before, the cabin being ejected from an opening in the façade, floating over Ground Zero, all the while rotating on its horizontal axis until it safely arrives on the ground floor. As the sensation of proceeding down the building is clearly felt—the elevator moves at a speed of 10 meters per second—this descent is an even more visceral experience. One feels as if they are falling or floating, and the animation suggests that this is precisely what *is* happening. As with the ascent, there is a feeling of spatial disassociation. Consequently, upon leaving the elevator, it takes a while to recalibrate. On wobbly feet, one moves toward the exit gates, while ambassadors seek to sell you a picture of yourself that was taken in the observatory. Then, passing the turnstile, one leaves in the direction of the 1WTC transport hub. Passing through the shopping mall, the experience ends where it began, in front of Reflecting Absence, at the foot of the 1WTC.

5.15 CONCLUSION: CONSTRUCTED THROUGH THE GAZE

The Viewing Platform and One World Observatory represent two conflicting viewpoints on the recent history of New York. The Platform was a place where one could come into supposedly immediate contact with a tragic site. Gazing into the pit was tantamount to acknowledging the “reality” of the events that occurred there. OWO forfeits this promise and instead suggests that the city is

something that cannot and should not be separated from its mediations. Moving along a pre-designed path, visitors get to experience a remediated version of New York that does away with everything that might disturb the image of the vibrant and wonderful City That Never Sleeps. Here, the ruptures of the past are buried under the images of a cheerful present. However, it would be naïve to assume that this presentation of the city as a sanitized space, optimized to cater to the “Tourist Gaze,” is exclusive to OWO. Instead, one should regard the observatory as both a symptom and a testing-ground for a city not meant for people to work or live in but conceived primarily as a site that one *visits*. The way in which the city itself is conjured as a brand is perfectly concomitant with the continuous effort of the Bloomberg administration to define New York as a “luxury product” (Brash 112).

This chapter has argued that Ground Zero is a site constructed through and supported by the Tourist Gaze, and that OWO plays an essential role in shaping and extending this gaze over New York City *as a whole*. While the Ground Zero Memorial seeks to bind its visitors to an imaginary community of grief and remembrance, constructing “prosthetic memories” (Landsberg) for those who did not bear witness to the events, OWO mediates images of an idealized future—an alternate timeline where the rupture of 9/11 quietly fades into the background. Like Top of the World, the attraction that preceded it, OWO turns the city itself into a consumable spectacle, a synecdoche of New York where the “[t]ough and harsh realities resistant to aesthetic sculpting do

not interfere” (Bauman 30). Spectators buy a ticket, are screened and subjected to a number of security procedures, see themselves as a form of accumulated data on a stylized world map, are guided through plastic foundations as they learn about the history of the building, and travel through time and space in a dizzying elevator. Then, they come out on top, see another film, then windows, are offered an iPad and encouraged to ask ambassadors for advice, stand on top of a glass portal that suggests they are floating hundreds of meters above the ground, and marvel at the view while taking pictures of themselves and the lofty surroundings. Lastly, they browse in the gift shop or grab a bite to eat before being herded off into the elevator, descending the tower and returning to an underground transport hub. This experience is sold to them with a promise that they will experience a unique view of New York City, and that they will See Forever.

In the end however, the promise to produce an overview remains unfulfilled. In trying to articulate a specific view on the world, a *Weltanschauung*, 1WTC brings the inability to see to the forefront. Similar to Top of the World, OWO depicts the city’s hectic complexity as something always in danger of escaping the eye. Human vision is incapable of fully processing the city into a comprehensible image, therefore the eye has to be technologically augmented. Whereas Top of the World sought to translate the city into a series of pavilions, OWO replaces windows with screens, computer-generated imagery and sculptural installations like the City Pulse. The result,

however, is not so much a clear image of New York but rather a reality in its own right—a simulacrum in which everything that might irritate the touristic sentiment is filtered out. The result, much like the scent that circulates within it, is decisively Middle C: an agreeable, slightly stale version of the city.

6. UNSTABLE HORIZONS. THE SKYSPACE LA AS A JOURNEY TOWARDS VISIBILITY.

6.1 SCRIPTED STAIRCASE/ TOPOGRAPHIES OF MOVEMENT

“Since the late fifties,” writes Norman Klein, “downtown Los Angeles has been bulldozed into an alien Manhattanized banking district, like an omelet scrambled nearly out of existence” (323). Bunker Hill in particular, as Klein puts it, has seen a near constant coming and going of ever-new “scripted spaces”:

[...] originally, while the central hill (Bunker Hill) was stripped, revitalization was supposed to center on Spring Street, the fading, stately twenties banking center. But that beginning was scrapped half way through in the mid-sixties, replaced by a more carceral, glass curtain-wall and brick pedway model for the hundreds of acres left barren on what had once been Bunker Hill. Then the Bunker Hill strategy was scrapped three-quarter way through, replaced by a mixed-use plan in the eighties—to repopulate the rim of downtown, invent an arts district among the old warehouses, add a few ‘urban villages.’ Then this in turn was stopped in its tracks by the recession of the nineties [...]. (323)

The latest script to be introduced to the Bunker Hill area is the Overseas Union Enterprise (OUE) Skyspace. Constructed in the wake of a general refurbishment of the U.S. Bank Tower after its purchase by a Singaporean investment fund, Skyspace seeks to bolster the tower’s fading revenues

through the installment of an observation deck. In a narrative which by now should seem familiar, Skyspace also speaks of the desire to generate a touristic anchor point in an area of Los Angeles that relatively few tourists visit. The aim of Skyspace is therefore twofold: first, increase the visibility of the US Bank tower on the real estate market by adding a lighthouse attraction; second, increase the visibility of the Los Angeles downtown area, turning it into a tourist site. But before I go into more detail about that particular observatory, I want to focus on another, less spectacular attraction that both figuratively and literally *leads up* to the observatory.

Added to the area in 1990 in the course of a general refurbishing of downtown Los Angeles, The Bunker Hill Steps in Los Angeles provide pedestrians with a pleasurable means to walk from Fifth Street up to Hope Street or vice versa. It thus connects the “historic” part of downtown with the distinctly “modern” business district. Taking the steps is like going back and forth in time: between *new* Los Angeles, with its glass and steel towers, and its past, symbolized by the art-deco sphinxes and stylized snakes that inhabit the façade of the 1926 Central Library Building located on the other side of the street. According to the LA Times, the steps serve not only as a bridge between eras but also social stratification. In 1992, the paper commented that the steps “breach an architectural barrier” between the corporate community of the hill and the “poor minorities that populate the shoddy, colorful bazaar of

Broadway. The link makes the hill practically, if not psychologically, accessible” (Wilson).

When jogging up the steps, one is treated to ever changing vistas of the city. On many occasions the architectural elements of the staircase, such as the baroque style arches, feel like frames that highlight a certain view. The top end is marked by a large, circular basin, in the center of which stands a bronze sculpture by Robert Graham: a single, one-meter tall female figure, standing naked on top of a three-tiered irregularly surfaced granite column. The eyes of the figures are closed and set southwards and her hands are cupped, as if offering something to the onlookers who made it to the top of the stairs. A trio of bronze crabs with their pincers raised is gathered around the base of the pedestal. From the basin, an artificial water channel mimicking a rocky stream flows along the handrails and bisects the staircase, while its perimeter is rife with typical L.A. flora: shrubs of aloe, banana plants as well as flowering species like purple orchid trees and Indian laurel fig. A tiny café on the first landing sells coffee and sandwiches to office workers on lunch break and to the few tourists that make it into this otherwise unremarkable part of the city.

The stairs’ risers—their individual height—are comparatively low, meaning that one tends to slow down when ascending them. It is as if your body responds to the architecture by changing its rhythm and speed. Invariably, the speed at which the various vistas come into view is governed by

the individual's pace. Going up the Bunker Hill Steps, it is unlikely that you will ever break a sweat. Instead, the pleasant height of the stairs encourages one to assume a light, bouncy gait. Hidden loudspeakers pipe in jazzy music. Together with the trickling sound of the artificial stream and the noises of the surrounding city—helicopters whirring overhead, ambulances going by, pneumatic hissing drifting over from the nearby bus stop—the loungy music creates a serene soundscape. The steps themselves are made out of poured concrete, but they are treated to look more like sandstone or travertine. This detail reveals an ambition to mimic possibly the most famous staircase in the world: the Spanish Steps in Rome.



Fig. 20: Röding, Philipp: "Bunker Hill Steps." 2019. JPEG file.

6.2 CINEMATIC STAIRS

In the *Dictionary of Kinematographic Objects*, Ulrike Kuch, referencing Eadweard Muybridge's *Women Walking Downstairs*, Billy Wilder's *Sunset Boulevard* and Wong Kar Wai's *In the Mood for Love*, describes film and stairs as inherently related technologies (158f.). Both modulate movement and are inherently sequential. A stair slows down movement, dissects it into discrete steps and intervals and at times produces an architectural slow-motion effect, like the one I have just described. By slowing down movement, they emphasize temporality—or mark time. In that sense they can be considered time-based media. As a cinematic object, Kuch writes, the staircase functions as a link between profilmic architecture and the architecture of film (159). In the case of the Bunker Hill Steps, this link becomes apparent.

There is an escalator parallel to the Bunker Hill Steps, presumably installed for those not able or willing to take the stairs. This is a curious addition, as it juxtaposes two very different regimes of mobility. The escalator, as Rem Koolhaas points out in his *Elements of Architecture*, despite its similarity, deviates from the principle of the staircase in a number of ways. In its first usages at 19th century expositions and fairgrounds, it was primarily conceived as another form of visceral entertainment. It is only a bit later, as Koolhaas notes, that “[e]ngineers and entrepreneurs are drawn to the ‘movable ramp’ as much for its aesthetic and physical thrills as for its practical

applications” (237). In the *Harvard Design School Guide to Shopping*, Srdjan Jovanovic Weiss and Sze Tsung Leong identify the escalator as enabling the cultural practice of shopping. Different from the elevator which

through its very mechanism insists on *division*, the escalator accommodates and combines any flow, efficiently creates fluid transitions between one level and another, and even blurs the distinctions between separate levels and individual spaces. The escalator profoundly modifies architecture—it denies the relevance of both compartments and floors [...] As an instrument of smoothness, the escalator triggered a vast new domain of construction, which—through the very smoothness of connection we now inhabit almost without thought. (237)

OUE Skyspace, whose entrance is located on the second level of the Bunker Hill Steps, introduces yet another paradigm of movement, one that both combines and radicalizes the principles of the staircase and the escalator, and heightens the element of smoothness to an unprecedented degree. I will now investigate the role this peculiar kinesthetic script plays with regards to Skyspace’s overall ambition to re-distribute and re-configure both the visibility of U.S. Bank Tower and the surrounding city.

6.3 ESCALATION

In 2016, as part of the general renovation, a 14-meter-long, 1.2-meter wide slide constructed entirely out of translucent, chemically fortified glass was

attached to the facade of the US-Bank Tower in downtown Los Angeles. The new slogan claims that it will “Transform Your View.” Taking the slide, *Skyspace LA* visitors can move from the 70th floor to an outdoor terrace on the 69th level of the building, while feeling as if they are floating in midair. As one journalist comments, “those game enough to try the stunt will arrive at a newly fitted-out observation deck, whose panoramic views of the city below will provide an opportunity to reflect on the full dimensions of what they have just experienced” (Pallazo). The ride lasts a little under 2 seconds and is much less thrilling than advertised. Nevertheless, the slide has drawn a lot of media attention since it was spectacularly lifted to the site using an aerial crane.

Both the stairs and the slide move people from one height to another. In the case of the US Bank tower, however, they represent two different ways of modulating the experience of the city. Whereas the stairs allow for relatively free movement, the slide is unidirectional. It suggests a different grammar of movement and, if we take the connection between the staircase and cinematic experience seriously, speaks of an entirely different mode of perception. Instead of moving themselves, people are moved like little packages. For Michael Sorkin, in his essay on Disneyland, itself a place built around the principle of setting its visitors in motion, “[t]he fantasy that undergirds the science of people-moving is regulation. It’s a primal ordering: the Newtonian vision of the universe, bodies intricately meshing and revolving like ticking clock-work, divinity legible precisely in the Laws of Motion” (221).

In this chapter, I theorize this shift from an actively moving subject to one that is passively transported, questioning both the materiality of the slide and recent suggestions that it is a viable, alternative means of transportation. Building on Kuch's argument on the stairs' cinematic aspect, I question how the slide reconfigures movement and images. I also respond to an article by Davide Deriu. In it, Deriu reads the advent of attractions like the Skyslide, whose business model and appearance is informed by the commodification of thrilling vertiginous experiences, as symptomatic of "a 'post-critical' design approach. By disengaging the user from rational and cognitive processes, this approach reinforces the dominant logic of neoliberalism" (102). In his article, Deriu focuses primarily on "skywalks," horizontally mounted panes of glass that allow people to walk on them. For him, these

skywalks are designed to embolden a dynamic and enterprising subject to enjoy a seemingly boundless degree of freedom, albeit an artificially staged one. This avid consumer of novel and ever-more thrilling experiences embodies the zeitgeist of our hyper-hedonistic age; that is, what psychoanalysts have identified as a social imperative of the present moment—'you must enjoy.' (9)

Although I agree that Skyspace LA possesses many of the characteristics associated with post-critical architecture, i.e. foregoing paradigms of self-reflection and representation in favor of a strong emphasis on ambiance and

special effects, I want to expand Deriu's argument by taking into account a three-dimensional glass object: the Skyslide.

I will thus view Skyspace LA as the symptom of a much more complicated re-configuration of visibility, one that becomes possible and even necessary due to shifts in the real-estate sector. Furthermore, it entails a re-configuration of visitor movement, encouraging engagement with the observatory's architecture that goes beyond the optical. In this way, it marks a departure from architecture conceived purely as visual spectacle, and heralds a shift that Deriu notes when he speculates that

[t]he viewing subject central to modern scopic regimes is being superseded by a sentient subject whose feelings are put through ever more intense psycho-physiological stimuli. This subject embodies a visual sensibility that is no longer predicated on processes of abstraction and cognition but involves an expanded, and increasingly immersive, field of sensory experience. (102)

I therefore want to take *Skyspace's* slogan—"Transform your View"—at its word, and regard this renovation as an example of how re-distributions and re-configurations of visibility within the context of the US-Bank correspond to a re-configuration of movement. This ultimately leads to what could be tentatively called a post-scopic regime. Further, I want to argue that this re-configuration is deployed first and foremost to solve another, more urgent crisis of visibility: the US-Bank Tower, as a result of changing relationships

between window space and workplace hierarchies, is in danger of becoming economically invisible. Once again, the categories of the spectacular and the speculative are pertinent. Visibility in the context of the U.S. Bank Tower means revenue; the refurbishment of the tower into a more iconic and spectacular version of itself aims to attract both tourists and potential renters alike. Three interrelated elements play a role in this and have shaped the basic structure of this chapter:

- (1) the specific materiality of the slide, i.e. transparent, chemically fortified glass and the fantasies that this material reflects;
- (2) the special way of moving through space that makes a slide what it is, and the way in which the relationship between modes of transportation and modes of perception has been re-configured time and again in both artistic and architectural practice; and
- (3) the fluctuations in demand for high-rise office space, which *Skyspace* seeks to mitigate by increasing the building's visibility within both the city and the market.

6.4 GLASS AND THE DEMATERIALIZATION OF BUILT SPACE

Every medium produces its own fantasies, and glass as a building material has a rich history. From the mythical throne of Solomon to contemporary corporate

architecture, “the phenomenon of transparency,” writes Hisham Elkadi, “has always captured the imagination of people” (2). Via a brief historical exegesis, I will show that glass and the concept of transparency were connected to ideas of democratic access. This dates back to reactions to Joseph Paxton’s Crystal Palace of 1851, and becomes particularly prominent in the writings of architects such as Laszlo Moholy Nagy and Frank Lloyd Wright, and cultural critics like Paul Scheerbarth and Walter Benjamin.

Although the history of glass and glass-making is a meandering narrative with multiple points of origin, occasional intersections and vast regional differences, most of the scholars I refer to focus on the Western context. Given such an obvious shortcoming, my account is by no means exhaustive. Nevertheless, I will show that the notion of transparency comes up time and again, together with the observation that glass simultaneously offers immersion and access while at the same time reinforcing restriction and isolation. Scholars such as Weihong Bao (2015) have noted that these two contradictory qualities make glass akin to another technology of vision: the cinema. This is an intriguing proposition, and allows one to speculate on the way in which Skyslide LA re-configures movement and imaging. Whereas the cinema sets images into motion, the Skyslide moves the spectator itself.

6.5 HISTORY OF GLASS-MAKING

In the third chapter of *The Virtual Window*, Anne Friedberg offers a historical account of glassmaking and how it relates to the history of architectural thinking. (105ff.) Glass as a mass-produced building material emerged in the second half of the 19th century “when new building types—factories, horticultural hothouses, exhibition halls, winter gardens, department stores—required copious amounts of light” (112). Prior to that, glass was a highly exclusive material, partly because up until the 18th century it was still relatively difficult to manufacture large, clear and durable panes, and partly because protectionist efforts kept prices artificially high (with Britain even going as far as to charge a designated window tax) (111). Joseph Paxton’s Crystal Palace, erected in London for the 1851 World’s Fair, was one of the most iconic glass buildings. It used glass not only as a decorative element or a necessary means of ventilation, but incorporated large glass panes into its very structure. Quoting contemporary accounts by visitors to the building, Anne Friedberg notes that

[g]lass buildings like the Crystal Palace posed a new visual system. Although the glass panes were encased in a skeletal structure that had iron frames, the sense of a framed window as a perforation of the wall was lost. Instead, the spectator’s gaze traced the wall as ‘the eye sweeps along an unending perspective.’ (113)

For Walter Benjamin, glass is the enemy of the secret. In contrast to the bourgeois interior of the 1880s, which inevitably bore the imprint of its owner, nothing would stick on its polished surface—people and things left no trace. To Benjamin, its coldness and durability are linked to the modern human condition itself (Benjamin). In his 1914 *Glasmarchitektur* manifesto, Paul Scheerbart, born 29 years before Benjamin, took a different turn, envisioning a city made entirely from translucent glass that was meant to overcome the outmoded *Backsteinarchitektur* (24). The veranda features most prominently in this polemic, as it provides a first step toward a more radical and complete *Glassarchitektur*. In what seems like an early description of a winter garden or “Florida Room,” Scheerbart suggests having the veranda encased within double-layered glass, allowing views into the garden, while constructing a space which is interesting to look at from both the inside and outside (12). Friedberg traces how both Scheerbart and, a little later in 1928, Frank Lloyd Wright thought of glass not only as a material with which to fill architectural apertures but one that would eventually allow for architecture’s complete dematerialization. This process would involve replacing load-bearing walls, ceilings, and floors with large, durable panes of glass:

But now the walls might disappear, the ceilings, too, and—yes—the floors as well. A mirror floor? Why not? In certain cases. Nicely calculated effects of this sort might amplify and transform a cabinet into a realm, a room into bewildering vistas and avenues, a single unit into unlimited areas of color, pattern and form. (Wright 13)

Glass in this instance puts forth a moment of dissolution of boundaries, of creating a borderless, virtual ensemble.

This is very much in accord with the “spherical model” of media Weihong Bao describes as “an immediate environment or field that encompasses a variety of media and constitutes a shared space of experience” (8). Bao notes that “glass had created a new mediating environment with promises of transparency by conflating the optical, spatial, critical, and sensual” (200). As one example of such a media sphere, she mentions the “affinity between cinema and [glass] architecture” (198) that manifested on different levels, i.e. architecture, urban design, film production and reception—as well ideological critique. The 1937 Wu Wentong residence, designed by Lazlo Hudec and located in the French quarter in Shanghai, featured, for example, “three floors of large sunrooms with panoramic glass windows and a glass rooftop” (202). In the spirit of Benjamin, glass architecture in Shanghai at that time advertised “transparency and efficiency as a new rational ideology” (203). The dance halls of 1920s and 1930s Shanghai, which “provided a phantasmagoric environment through the play of optical and acoustic illusions” (220) are another example. As if taking Frank Lloyd Wright’s suggestion of a mirrored floor literally, these spaces “featured glass floors, footlights, and extravagant lighting systems” (220).

Glass as a building material, echoing the utilitarian rhetoric of the International Style, responded to democratic sensibilities with its emphasis on accountability, transparency and a “new dynamic between publicity and privacy” (203). Furthermore, its material qualities, i.e. a “shared affinity with light [...], optical quality of radiance, lust, and sensorial bedazzlement” (218), linked it to another symptom of modernity: the cinema. For Bao, both cinema and glass cater to the desire of gaining “ultimate physical access” while maintaining “physical separation” (218). This conceptual resemblance between glass and cinema was not only, then, an inspiration for filmmakers, but also for the architecture of movie houses themselves. Bao specifically mentions the unrealized *Glass House* project by Sergei Eisenstein, supposedly based on “a glass tower where people live in utter isolation despite their close physical and visual proximity” (220).



Fig. 21: Röding, Philipp: "skyslide with LA cityscape in the background." 2019. Jpeg file.

For Hisham Elkadi, this paradoxical quality of glass that offers both access and restriction, manifests in high-profile projects like Norman Foster's remodeling of the German Reichstag, where the old iron dome of the building was replaced with one made of glass. Elkadi underscores how, on the one hand, "glass is increasingly used to implement transformation concepts" (48) that are mostly concerned with an emphatic increase in accessibility and transparency (and symbolize key features of modern democracies). On the other, this emphatic transparency is seldom much more than a gesture. Whereas the glass dome of the Reichstag might allow visitors to passively observe the debates of the Bundestag, "they cannot listen or be listened to and are denied any real interaction [...] The transparency of glass is used in this case to conceal the contemporary powers of the Reichstag; the dome is a reference to tradition in order to conceal tradition" (48). For Elkadi, the same holds true for corporate architecture like office buildings. Although they construct glass lobbies that supposedly open up to the public sphere, this is merely a "'slick image' rather than [a real use of glass'] transparent qualities" as it forms "physical barriers that not only exclude unwelcomed environmental interference with business, but also exclude people" (49). In *Utopia's Ghost*, Reinhold Martin critiques such a use of glass for upholding "the modernist equation between optical and cognitive transparency [...] together with a counterintuitive distinction between authentic and inauthentic materiality" (104). For Martin, as I have already mentioned in the previous chapter, the use of (reflective) glass in corporate

architecture instead produces “a time-space that is neither interior nor exterior, neither here nor there, neither this nor that, neither now or then,” forever caught up in what he calls a “recursive feedback loop” (109). In short, what is important about reflective glass is not the way it pretends to offer visual access while being actually restrictive, but its optical self-referentiality.

When it came to the design of the Skyslide, the desire for sustained translucency was reflected in the choice of building materials. Very durable glass panes, like car windshields, achieve increased structural stability by placing a layer of synthetic film between two plates of glass. However, the plastics used in this process tend to turn yellow over time, especially when exposed to sunlight. The resulting degrees of yellowness can be measured and categorized using a standardized yellowness index. For architects and designers this is problematic, as certain structures such as Skyslide have to be extremely durable while at the same maintaining a certain aesthetic integrity. To make things even more complicated, Los Angeles is a seismically active region, which means that besides the weight of the visitors, the slide needed to resist the occasional earthquake. To account for these contingencies, M.Ludvik Engineering, a New York-based firm specializing in structural glass that oversaw the construction of the slide, turned to SentryGlas, made by Japanese chemical company Kuraray (Pacheco). According to its brochure, SentryGlas combines enormous structural strength with a long lasting clarity—apparently it has one of the lowest scores on the yellowness index—allowing architects

and designers to completely change the “aspect of entire buildings and interior spaces” (Kuraray & Trosifol 13).

Perhaps unsurprisingly, companies like Kuraray or Corning Glass employ a similar rhetoric as avant-gardist thinkers like Scheerbart and Wright when it comes to the marketing their products. On the company’s homepage, Corning Glass even goes as far as to proclaim that after the iron, bronze and atomic ages, we have now arrived in an “age of glass,” with translucent materials playing an ever-increasing role in every aspect of life. This is marketing hyperbole that echoes Scheerbart’s vision of a future where glass is ubiquitous. In its short film *A Day Made of Glass*, this narrative is taken to its logical conclusion, and the convergence between moving images and glass has been fully realized. Released online in 2011 but set in the “near future,” the 5-minute film begins by showing the morning routine of a family. From the moment the electrochromic terrace windows automatically turn from opaque to translucent in order to let in the sunshine of a new day, we get to see dozens of different glass surfaces, most of which double as a display of some sort. The all-glass countertop of the family’s kitchen, for example, is “display enabling,” which means that besides functioning as a stove, it can also display the latest news and weather information. In fact, every glass pane in the film is potentially “display enabling,” meaning that besides other functions every surface is potentially a screen. The walls of a bus station provide not only shelter but display information about its position, weather conditions and

current time and date; and the façade of a building also figures as a giant, animated billboard. In *A Day Made of Glass*, architecture has become both dwelling and screen. The main function of built environments, then, is to act as large-scale extensions of the smartphone display.

For Skyspace LA the Skyslide's transparency triggers a sense of acrophobia. But it allows visitors to test their courage and to engage in a situation that is only seemingly risky. It also generates an unusual situation that has the additional benefit of being highly photogenic. This is a point that Deriu also makes with reference to so-called skywalks, where people can look down at their feet and see what is below them:

Marking a shift from the traditional mechanisms of panoramic vision, these spaces presuppose an expanded function of the tourist gaze involving a multi-sensuous, kinaesthetic experience: in other words, they are stages for the performance of 'embodied actions' [...] The actions are almost invariably recorded on camera as the act of photographic or filming one's body suspended over the void is a popular means of validating the memorable experience. (101)

My own experience at Skyspace LA confirms Deriu's suspicion that one apparent purpose of the Skyslide is its photogeneity, which helps in turn to secure "wide exposure through media representations, such as brochures and websites" (Deriu 100). Almost every time someone went down the slide, people waited to take a picture of them at the other side. Surely, the Instagrammability of the Skyslide and the touristic desire to create memorable

experiences were important factors in the U.S. Bank Tower's decision to increase its visibility. It is also spectacular in a twofold sense. It spectacularizes the view from above while at the same time generating a situation that is itself spectacular: people seemingly suspended in midair.

Engagement with the slide, however, goes well beyond the optical. As Deriu notes, using glass as a kind of "horizontal window" (100) also encourages a multi-sensorial engagement with architecture. In this sense, Skyspace LA marks a departure from an emphasis on the ocular. Indeed, in the Skyslide the optical and the visceral are conjoined. One not only takes in the panoramic view with one's eyes, but the viewing experience activates the body in its entirety. Here, the observation deck allows the visitor to step into the field of vision itself, and to become totally immersed. In so doing, Skyslide presumably without knowing, responds to Juhani Pallasmaa's observation that most architecture seems overly fixated on sight. For Pallasmaa, drawing from a wide array of sources concerning the history of vision, this ocularcentrism also contains an ethical component. That is, the dominance of the sense of vision equates to a nihilistic drive:

The hegemonic eye sees domination over all fields of cultural production, and it seems to weaken our capacity for empathy, compassion and participation with the world [...] Instead of reinforcing one's body-centered and integrated experience of the world, nihilistic

architecture disengages and isolates the body [...] The world becomes a hedonistic but meaningless visual journey. (25)

In a gesture reminiscent of Debord's criticism of *The Society of the Spectacle*,³⁹ Pallasmaa argues with equal urgency that the ocularcentrism governing architecture is likewise driving urban planning:

from the idealized town plans of the Renaissance to the Functionalist principles of zoning and planning that reflect the 'hygiene of the optical'. In particular, the contemporary city is increasingly the city of the eye, detached from the body by rapid motorized movement, or through the overall aerial grasp from an aeroplane. (32)

Both the US Bunker staircase and the skyslide present an alternative to the experience of the city that Pallasmaa describes. When one walks up the stairs or takes the slide, what one sees is coupled to the movement of one's body. In this sense, they realize the kind of "situational bodily encounter" (33) that Pallasmaa finds so lacking in city architecture. For the designers of Skyspace LA, this bodily encounter serves as the culmination of a "journey towards visibility" along which visitors are moved, and is constantly anticipated by the preceding attractions.

³⁹ At one point, Pallasmaa argues that due to the overabundance and commodification of imagery, human beings themselves assume the status of commodities and that "[w]e are made to live in a fabricated dream world" (37). Although Pallasmaa only invokes Debord as one of several writers occupying an "anti-ocular" position, such rhetoric clearly reflects Debord's diction (23).

6.6 JOURNEY TOWARDS VISIBILITY

Stimulant, the sub-contractor in charge of designing Skyslide's various screen-based experiences, had a distinct narrative in mind. On their website they write that in order to entertain visitors on their way to the elevator bays

the owners and space designers asked Stimulant to envision a way to make this transition exciting, suspenseful, and purposeful. Our experiences are designed to fit within a 'journey towards visibility' that begins with low-resolution installations from others at the base and ends with the grand reveal of the view and the one-of-a-kind Skyslide on the 70th floor. ("Stimulant")

For example, the first attraction that one encounters after clearing the entrance line and passing the mandatory security check is a pair of giant, curved screens that almost entirely surround the visitor in a sort of broken circle. These screens comprise a "50' x 30' interactive projection-mapped ellipsoid space which surrounds visitors with an abstract representation of the topography of Los Angeles, as rendered from the viewpoint of the tower" ("Stimulant"). In this videogame-like, abstract landscape, a number of floating gems symbolize points of interest in the surrounding area. As soon as a visitor approaches, the gems pop open to reveal the identity of the sites they represent. In another room, visitors step into an artificial mirror trap of sorts, which produces the optical and physical illusion that one is hovering above an infinitely deep abyss, whereas the

final installation prepares visitors mentally to elevate up the remaining 16 floors to level 70. The Reflection Wall experience playfully tracks visitors' body shapes with thousands of effervescent digital bubbles. A timed 'flash' freezes their poses posterity (and picture-taking) before casting their bubbly avatars upward on magical winds. ("Stimulant")

Once more the observatory is presented as a succession of optical attractions that instill a sense of wonder and amazement in the visitors. The Reflection Wall is particularly curious as it functions both as a device that observes and tracks the shape of its visitors, i.e. it engages in a two-fold logic of observation similar to One World Observatory, while simultaneously transforming their bodies into weightless, non-corporeal "bubbly avatars."

Interactivity, vertigo, disintegration and floating; even before taking the elevator to the observation deck on the 70th floor, the visitor has already been subjected to a plethora of situations that both prepare for and anticipate the experience of the Skyslide. According to the guiding narrative, it marks the preliminary endpoint in this "journey towards visibility," both fulfilling and radicalizing the promises of vision, interactivity and immersion. It is at the same time a journey towards an increasing mobilization of the spectators. After being confined by the line, the security check and the various retractable-belt-barrier-stanchions that regulate their movement on the way to the elevator bays, and after they have already been animated by the interactive screens, they find themselves briefly in a state of perceived weightlessness. Skyslide once more emphasizes the linearity of the entire experience. It is both

the grand finale and an opportunity to charge an additional fee. However, the significance of the slide is by no means self-evident and demands further theorization. To this end I refer to an ongoing project by German artist Carsten Höller that involves installing slides in the public realm as an alternative to more traditional means of transport.

6.7 TEST SITE

In a 2006 interview with Vincent Honoré, assistant curator at the Tate Modern, artist Carsten Höller stated that a slide is basically “a sculpture that you can travel inside” and as such it produces a distinct “emotional state somewhere between delight and madness” (Höller & Honoré). Höller’s latest work *Test Site* provided the occasion for the interview, which was on display from October 2006 until April 2007 in the great turbine hall of the Tate Modern. *Test Site* consisted of five spiraled slides made from steel and fiberglass that were installed on different floors of the building. Not unlike Skyslide, visitors were able to take the slides or pass on them entirely—depending on their preference. But Höller emphasized that the experience of the slide was not contingent upon actually taking it. Passive observation, i.e. registering its interesting shape and materiality, would provide an aesthetic experience in its own right. If they chose to do so, however, visitors would encounter a change in perception that would stay with them long after the ride was over—an effect Höller enthusiastically compared to how trains and automobiles altered long-

standing notions of time and space. After the exhibition ended, the slides were to be transplanted into different contexts, underscoring the prototypical character of the original models.

Höller's description of an "emotional state somewhere between delight and madness" is taken from the second chapter of Roger Caillois' *Man, Play and Games*. In order to come to terms with his object of study, Caillois needed to devise a "principal of classification" (11) under which he could then subsume the various methods, arrangements and habits of play. He does so by introducing four concepts: *agôn*, *alea*, *mimicry* and *ilinx*. Of special interest for Höller must have been the last category, *ilinx*, which, as previously discussed, describes "a state of dizziness and disorder" (12). The games filed under this rubric include

those which are based on the pursuit of vertigo and which consist of an attempt to momentarily destroy the stability of perception and inflict a kind of voluptuous panic upon an otherwise lucid mind. [...] it is a question of surrendering to a kind of spasm, seizure, or shock which destroys reality with sovereign brusqueness. (23)

For Caillois, these *ilinx*-style games have a moral dimension, as their specific form of movement suggests a "vertigo of a moral order, a transport that suddenly seizes the individual. This vertigo is readily linked to the desire for disorder and destruction" (24).

This idea that a certain structure of bodily experience, i.e. feeling weightless and dizzy, would engender the breakdown not only of moral but

also of perceptual categories found great resonance in the scholarly work *Test Site* generated. This is especially obvious in the exhibition's guidebook, which contains commentary and supplementary material. Jessica Morgan, curator of the Tate Unilever Series that commissioned Höller's work, preemptively defends the installation against the accusation that it evidences "the ultimate realisation of the twenty-first-century art museum as entertainment zone" ("Tate Modern" 13), by pointing out how the five slides effectively solve a problem posed by the building's architecture. "Who visiting the museum has not waited," she writes, "for the lifts or frustratingly swept past the second level by the escalator that mysteriously refuses to stop there" (13). Morgan follows the artist's proposition that beside its more pragmatic applications, the real value of the slide is its potential to generate not only an alternative way of moving through space but also to foster a more fundamental change in the way we see things: "To slide on the way to or from work, as an interruption to the drudgery of commuter travel, could, once undertaken as a routine activity, subtly alter our outlook" (14).

Test Site's ambition as an exhibition is then to do exactly what the title suggests, which is to provide a testing ground for the slide as a new and exciting mode of transportation. The ultimate aim is widespread implementation into the urban landscape. The seriousness of this endeavor is underscored time and again throughout the guidebook, whose second part contains a "Feasibility Study for London" called "Slides in the Public Realm"

(57). The study was produced by the General Public Agency (GPA), “a regeneration consultancy specialising in social, spatial and cultural planning with particular emphasis on the public realm” (59). Again, the “core principle” guiding the study “was that slides are, or could be, a beneficial and practical addition to the life and fabric of the city” (60). After reviewing the regional policy context, regulative frameworks, potential health and safety issues and financial feasibility, the study confirms Höller's initial assumptions: widespread implementation of slides into the London cityscape has the potential to re-introduce “pleasure to the urban fabric” (66) offering “free fun to all ages and sectors of society.” It does so by injecting “pleasure and adrenaline into the everyday experience of the city” (85). As of writing, Höller’s slides have been introduced into a variety of settings: in front of a mall in Florida; inside the Danish architecture center in Copenhagen; in an observation tower located at Swiss design company Vitra’s Campus near Weill am Rhein, Switzerland; at the Bundeskunsthalle in Bonn; or in the office of Miuzia Prada in Milan, where the slide provides the fashion mogul with convenient access to the parking garage. That being said, their widespread implementation into public space has remained a fantasy. Whatever the case, the narrative that the slide might complement other forms of vertical access such as escalators and stairs persists.

What echoes throughout the material gathered in the guidebook is a celebration and excitement about restructuring urban space in a way that is

not only more practical but also much more fun. Although the curators fully anticipate the objection that installations like these are mere expressions of the presumed hedonistic urges that governs everyday life, there is an obvious overlap with the experience economy discourse outlined in chapter 2. As the study undertaken by the GPA shows, *Test Site's* proclaimed ambition is the eventual integration of slides into the urban fabric as an everyday means of transportation. Skyslide LA, unknowingly or not, seems to make a similar suggestion, by proposing the glass slide as an exciting way to bridge two floors. For Höller, the slide offers an opportunity to engage with public space and architecture in a way that is non-optical. It marks a departure from scopic engagement toward the multi-sensorial encounters that Juhani Pallasmaa envisioned. In the case of Skyspace LA, *seeing* the city entails a brief subjection to an altogether different “scopic regime” whose optical component might only be secondary.

If the observatory can be described as a machine that increases and transforms visibility, then one needs to think about who or what the subject of this transformation actually is. At first glance, this seems to be a simple question: *Skyspace* changes the way in which its visitors view the cityscape of downtown Los Angeles. However, this is only one half of the transformation. To understand the other, we need to return to the question of how the transformative potential of glass became a key element in office design.

6.8 MARKET VISIBILITY

In his account of the evolutions in corporate architecture in the United States between 1940 and 1960, Reinhold Martin argues that changes in office space design went hand in hand with a reconceptualization of the relationship between workplace and employee. At the same time, a strong emphasis was placed on achieving control via the deployment of a self-regulating social space or system. Staying true to the biological metaphors that guided many efforts in this regard, the aim of the modern workspace—the *Rockefeller Center* is an early iteration of this seminal principle—was to transform the employee from an isolated unit into a productive member of a self-regulating social organism—not unlike a drone in a beehive. “‘Human relations’,” Martin writes, was “the name given to the attempt to improve productivity by appealing to the employee’s sense of identification with the corporation” (*The Organizational Complex* 91f.). The office was to become a “social condenser,” a “functional whole in a dynamic equilibrium” where employees would experience their workplace as a space “comparable to (and even substituting for) the worker’s family” (91f.). This doctrine of dynamic equilibrium was then translated into architectural terms. The result: a flexible spatial matrix “capable of accommodating office partitions, ceiling tiles, lighting fixtures, and furniture, in any number of combinations” (95). In a corresponding effort, the

curtain-wall became the guiding principle of corporate façade design. Since the structural load is carried by the frame of the building, the curtain-wall could be constructed from lightweight-materials such as glass. Martin's case in point is the 1950 *United Nations Secretariat*, which was

the first major office building of the postwar period to use a full-height curtain wall suspended off the structure for two of its main exposures. The building [...] was clad in tinted glass on its east and west facades, with steel glazing mullions set at 4 feet on center. (91)

In this case, glass allowed for maximum flexibility when it came to the partitioning of interior space, while at the same time perpetuating an enthusiasm for standardized modularity. In a way, Martin's critique echoes that of Frederic Jameson, who identifies architecture as the link that connects "infrastructure (land speculation, finance capital) to superstructure (aesthetic form)" (*The Cultural Turn* 115). Late finance capitalism, Jameson argues, finds its expression in a space in which "not only the contents but also the frames are now freed to endless metamorphosis" (115). This curtain wall's metamorphic quality is key to sustaining long-term profitability, as it allows swift adjustment of interior space, catering to whatever the particular needs of a future tenant might be.

When comparing a building like the UN Secretariat to the U.S. Bank Tower, the programmatic difference in façade design becomes obvious, especially in terms of the distribution of window space. The design of the U.S. Bank Tower is a playful commentary on the Art deco style of the Central

Library across the street. The façade is structured by a series of setbacks and triangular window bays. Although the setbacks allowed for the installation of a viewing terrace on the outside of the building, the triangular window bays dictate how viewing space is distributed on the inside. This had exactly the negative long-term effect on profitability that a technology like the curtain-wall is meant to prevent. A 2013 L.A. Times article states that at the time the building was sold to OUE, its rate of occupancy was only around 60%. According to the article, this a direct result of the distribution of window space:

U.S. Bank Tower suffers from its previous success as a bastion of corporate American style in the 1980s and 1990s, when white-collar companies were typically more formal and hierarchical. Much of the empty space for rent reflects a departing era with big offices for executives hogging all the prime window space and bullpen work stations for support staff clustered inside around the elevator cores. (Vincent)

Unable to comply with shifting hierarchy models, the U.S. Bank Tower's rigid floorplan ultimately led to the devaluation of its office space, which was compounded by a general decrease in demand. Another article (DeBord) quotes a UCLA Economic Letter by David Shulman, Senior Economist at the UCLA Ziman Center for Real Estate, in which he describes the increase in office vacancy rates from 1990 to 2013. He begins his letter with the observation that "many of the office-intensive industries have stopped growing" (Shulman). This is exacerbated by the fact that the overall "planned space per worker will decline from 225 square feet in 2010 to 151 square feet in 2017"

(Shulman) partly because office equipment is demanding less and less overall space.

In order to counteract this development, Overseas Union Enterprise—besides re-hauling the observation deck—ordered an extensive remodeling of the lobby, with the former façade being replaced by a curtain wall. The logic of visual flexibility as described by Reinhold Martin was retroactively applied to the U.S. Bank Tower, effectively overwriting the building's original geometry. In addition, and again pointing towards the convergence of glass and moving images, in the inside of the lobby OUE installed

the nation's largest (i.e. 126 feet by 17 feet) hi-resolution digital art wall, which will be visible from the street outside. The display will respond to the real-time environment, delivering a swath of shifting imagery controlled by an intelligent sensory-based algorithm. (Harlander)

In the case of the US-Bank tower the overhaul of the observation deck followed an overall drive to increase the visibility of the building by adding a spectacular attraction to it. By harnessing the qualities historically attributed to transparent glass and by spectacularizing as many aspects as possible OUE seeks to guarantee the profitability of its investment. Unsatisfied with the rigidity of the old façade the new owner seeks a more flexible solution and opts for a glass curtain wall whose transparency allows passersby to view the gargantuan screen inside. Once more one can witness a convergence of the categories of speculation and spectacle. In the case of

the US Bank tower an increase in property value is sought via an increase in spectacularity. However, due to unexpected developments, this bet paid off only partly. In early 2019, The LA Times reported that OUE was planning to put the building back on the market (“US Bank Tower). After having invested heavily in the alterations the investor sought to realize the speculated increase in value. In July 2020 it was reported that the building, acquired by OUE for \$368 million was sold at a discount to Silverstein Properties for \$430 million (Vincent). Due to the uncertainties brought by the pandemic and the subsequent decline in demand for office space the increase in value was given, but not as high as originally assumed. Whether or not the owner will be able to cash in more substantially on the property remains an open question.



Fig. 22: Röding, Philipp: „The largest HD-Videowall west of the Mississippi. Lobby US-Bank Tower.” 2019. Jpeg file.

6.9 CONCLUSION

Rem Koolhaas wrote that the escalator replaced the stairs in that it had consumers float in whatever direction needed. It thus “smooths the transition from industrial to consumer capitalism, from the city to the metropolis” (*Elements of Architecture* 2037). Does the Skyslide, deployed as one part of a strategy to ensure that the U.S. Bank tower remains profitable, signal a similar shift in the political economy, away from an economy of products and services to the commodification of experiences?

The slide, unlike the stairs, no longer demands any effort from its users. Instead, people can be sent around like little packages while experiencing the delightful vertigo that comes with sudden relocation, and the thrill of being so high up. As an even more fluid “architecture of transit” than the escalator, the slide leaves no space to make an individual decision—you go where the slide wants you to go. Whereas stairs can be said to be interactive, the slide is radically linear. Briefly overwhelmed by the experience, it is as if you suddenly “wake up” at a different location. In the context of the U.S. Bank tower, this re-configuration of movement coincides with a re-arrangement and re-enhancement of visibility.

In the new tower lobby, the two constitutive technologies OUE deploys in its quest to increase and re-configure visibility on as many levels as possible—glass and moving images—are in immediate spatial proximity. The

glass façade of the lobby is mirrored by a screen in its inside. Seventy floors higher, one witnesses their convergence. In the Skyslide, the view of Los Angeles appears not so much as an optical phenomenon but rather as one that conflates the optical with the sensory.

The renovations commissioned by OUE rely heavily on moving images in order to re-distribute and re-configure visibility. Peculiarly, this re-configuration is achieved not only through the deployment of moving images but by re-configuring the movements of the visitors themselves. This becomes apparent in the underlying assumptions that guided the design of the observatory, as well as when one looks at the design of the new lobby. The end result of this renovation in turn raises an epistemological question. Can one still regard this ensemble as a configuration of architecture or would it make more sense to call it a configuration of motion and imagery?

7. CONCLUSION: CONTEMPORARY OUTLOOKS

In 2016, His Highness Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid ad Maktoum, Prime Minister and de facto Ruler of Dubai and Vice President of the United Arab Emirates, unveiled plans for the Dubai Creek Tower. This structure would, after its completion, stand almost a kilometer tall over Dubai's harbor area. Emaar Properties, the real estate developer responsible for the project, describes it using a rhetoric that by now should sound familiar:

The design by Santiago Calatrava, chosen after a competitive pitch from the world's top architects, was a perfect fit to our requirement for a landmark that defined our urban core for Dubai Creek Harbour. It integrates not just design excellence but also strong environmental and smart-tech considerations. With the tower, we are delivering a compelling destination that will add long-term economic value to Dubai and the Emirates [...] It will also position Dubai Creek Harbour as one of the most desired residential, leisure and touristic attractions, providing tourists and residents with a modern, luxurious and sustainable environment in which to live, work, learn and entertain. (Calatrava)

Again, all the elements are there: an emphasis on iconicness; the promise of added value through landmark architecture; the tower's positioning of Dubai against competitor cities around the globe; and the assertion that the tower will be a cool destination for tourists.



Fig. 23: Dubai Creek Tower. Rendering. URL: https://static.dezeen.com/uploads/2016/10/dubai-creek-harbour-worlds-tallest-tower-architecture-new-santiago-calatrava-united-arab-emirates_dezeen_2364_col_3.jpg [Last Accessed September 14 2020]

The render image (Fig.23) depicts this piece of developer architecture as an almost mythical site: a magical tower—guided, as Calatrava explains, by the shape of a lily—straight out of *One Thousand and One Nights*. The structure, which will house ten (!) observation decks, is almost transparent. And surrounded by residential blocks whose value will derive from being in its

proximity and that all seem to be *looking* towards it, the tower forms the center of an entire, yet-to-be-developed district.

In Dubai Creek Tower, the principles of speculation, spectacle and observation find direct expression. Hovering a kilometer above sea level, only precariously anchored through a web of steel cables, the tower's exultant insubstantiality heralds the paradigm of its time—the components of which this project has speculated upon. Forming the center of the Dubai Creek Harbor, a luxury waterfront development still under construction, the tower was originally due to be completed in the third quarter of 2020, in time for the Expo 2020 in the city. However, since the coronavirus outbreak the fate of the project is uncertain. Information concerning construction progress is scarce and sometimes contradictory. Some outlets (Cachia) report that work on the site has halted altogether, while others state that construction continues unimpeded (a spokesperson for Emaar property vehemently dismissed claims that the work has stopped as hostile misinformation ["Emaar denies"]). Whether Dubai Creek Tower will live up to the speculative promise of adding long-term economic value to the city or become a spectacular ruin of speculation remains to be seen. In any case, its precarious status reflects deeper questions that concern the future of the observation deck.

I have described the observation deck as a piece of architecture whose function is dictated by the future-oriented logic of speculation, as it embodies the promise to generate value through its spectacular presence within the city.

At the same time, for its visitors, it transforms the city into a spectacular sight.

Approaching the observation deck through the triad of observation, speculation and spectacle also highlighted its symptomatic character. Although descriptions suggest that each observation deck is singular, they appear to me more like the articulation of a certain paradigm, along the lines of which entire cities can and should be designed. According to this paradigm, cities are re-organized as places readymade for touristic consumption. An emphasis on “memorable experiences” is coupled with the ambition to achieve iconicness in an effort to generate future value.

The observation deck appeared at a time when the conceptual framework of the city was shifting. In the mid 1970s, Top of the World produced a curated image of New York that stood in stark contrast to the city’s economic and social realities. It made use of a variety of technologies—first and foremost moving images—in order to re-construct urban space in the form of an imaginative playground, a space of risk-free adventure, unthreatening diversity, and celebratory discovery. At the beginning of the 21st century, the model of the city that Top of the World introduced assumed a life of its own. One World Observatory, The Tulip, Skyspace LA, and The Edge are all variants of the same desire to turn the urban experience into a product. In Los Angeles, the Skyslide escalates the promise of vertiginous play by adding a glass slide to the façade.

7.1 THE CITY READS ITSELF

One of the questions that this dissertation leaves open is what role the observation deck will play within so-called “smart cities.” Orit Halpern, in an essay on Songdo, a “smart city” near Seoul, discusses the central operation room, where the city is constantly monitored. In this room, all the data collected by the city’s various systems is visualized. However, the sheer quantity of these visualizations, as Halpern writes, oftentimes proves too much to handle for human observers:

Interfaces show data on the environment, traffic and other measures of urban space being gathered through closed-circuit televisions and other systems [...] Large panels show snippets of information culled from various sensor systems, but the actual flow of information is too great for human cognitive processing capacity. (125f.)

As Halpern notes, the operators who are tasked with sitting in this room, staring at the data visualizations without being able to decipher them, often quit due to an “excess of boredom and fatigue” (126).



Fig. 24: Songdo Control Room. URL: http://www.businesskorea.co.kr/news/photo/201711/23547_19779_0.jpg
[Last Accessed September 14, 2020]

This is because the bulk of the operations do not require more than basic human oversight: it monitors itself with great efficiency, as the data collected by the various sensors placed in the city is “autonomously analyzed by IBM algorithms that alert the operators only in case of emergency, sometimes after already having initiated emergency protocols” (125).

The smart city, then, radicalizes the observation deck’s ambition to turn the city into what de Certeau called a “surface that can be dealt with.” At the same time, it does away with the necessity for a human observer. Geddes’ idea of an Outlook Tower overlooking the city with the help of a camera obscura, which enhances its view through a wealth of statistical data, anticipates the visual overload generated by the control room. However, whereas Outlook Tower emphatically foresaw a human observer processing and synthesizing the information provided in order to make targeted interventions into urban space, the Songdo operating room delegates this sense-making to various

algorithms. Milton Glaser, when planning Top of the World, also wanted human beings to engage with the statistical data he intended to collect and visualize. For example, he wanted to etch statistical information about the city directly into the windowpanes, thus generating a sort of analog augmented view. Further, One World Observatory entertains its visitors with a constant offering of data both about themselves—remember the huge digital map displaying information about the visitors right after they enter—and the city that surrounds them. The Tulip’s classroom in the sky made learning about the city one of its central components. But in Halpern’s description of Songdo, it is no longer humans that observe the city; instead, the city observes itself, autonomously taking care of any irregularities. It remains to be seen whether or not these algorithmic views will do away with the primacy of the elevated view that the observation deck celebrates. Returning to de Certeau’s image once again, if algorithms rather than humans read the text of the city, the nature of the view is bound to change.

7.2 PANDEMIC FUTURES

At the time of writing, the observation decks I have concerned myself with and the global economy of tourism that sustains them are facing a more immediate challenge. Due to the Covid-19 pandemic, global tourism has almost ceased to exist. With governments issuing a wide range of lockdown orders and imposing

a variety of travel bans, the observation decks seem strangely obsolete. Having speculated on the sustained growth of the tourist sector, observation decks around the world are either empty or have to regulate admission carefully. Since March 14, 2020 One World Observatory is closed until further notice. The same is true for SkySpace LA. In May 2020, the observation deck atop the World Financial Center in Shanghai reopened after being closed for four months. However, visitors are required to wear masks, have their temperature checked at the beginning and observe social distancing rules. Any decision on the appeal that the Tulip team launched after the mayoral office veto has been postponed for months (Pitcher 2020). The approval of a building almost entirely dependent on touristic activity seems, however, rather doubtful at the moment.

It will be interesting to see whether this is only a temporary slump, after which observation decks around the globe return to business as usual, or if current developments herald the beginning of the end. When I began working on the topic, there was a veritable building frenzy, with projects around the world competing to build the highest observation deck of all, with Dubai Creek Tower set to claim the crown. Now, the current situation renders these sites strangely historical, short-lived expressions of an unsustainable paradigm. Depending on further developments, this thesis can then either be read as a series of speculations on a contemporary phenomenon or a historic work concerned with a bygone era.

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