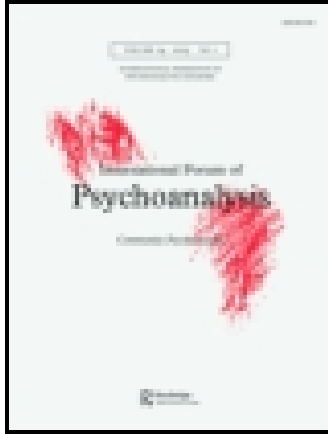


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Stairways of the Mind

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Stairways of the Mind

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Our materialist culture has turned buildings into objects of utility devoid of any mytho-poetic content. However, in addition to providing physical shelter, buildings should also house our souls, memories and dreams. Like all art, architecture expresses the human existential condition, and our lived space and mind define each other reciprocally. Architecture addresses the body and is experienced multi-sensorily. Fundamental architectural experiences are encounters that appear as verbs rather than nouns. One of the most potent images of architecture is the stair, which possesses a wealth of metaphoric and symbolic connotations. The stair is the symbolic spine of the house, whereas ascending a stair in dream-imagery signifies copulation. The qualitative differences of ascending and descending derive from the images of Heaven and Hell. Stairs appear frequently in literature, cinema and painting due to their extraordinary image power. The staircase is simultaneously a stage and an auditorium. It is also a vertical configuration of the labyrinth with consequent associations of vertigo, and getting lost. Our human reality has become threateningly concrete and one-dimensional as the environment has lost its symbolic dimension. One of the most demanding tasks of architects today is to re-mythologize and re-poetize the built environment. Is it feasible that stairs would again come to express the existence of Heaven and Hell?

Key word: architecture, stairs, senses, symbols, space, myths

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Architecture as an Existential Metaphor

Our obsessively materialist and quasi-rational age has turned buildings into purely instrumental constructions, ‘machines for living’, (1) serving merely the practicalities of life. The aspiration to expand the qualities of architecture into the realm of aesthetics only seems to emphasize the understanding of buildings as visually beautified objects of utility. We have almost forgotten that the task of our houses is not only to provide physical shelter and bodily comfort. A house does not solely constitute our ‘third skin’, an externalization of our bodily functions, it is also an externalization of our imagination, memory and conceptual capacities. The French philosopher Gaston Bachelard, whose phenomenological writings on the poetics of space have decisively inspired studies of the mytho-poetic basis of architecture, gives a monumental task to our houses: “Our house is our corner of the world ... it is our first universe, a real cosmos in every sense of the word. ... It is an instrument with which to confront the cosmos” (2:4, 46).

Buildings and towns are devices, which structure and articulate our existential experience. Maurice

Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenological analyses of the human encounter with the ‘flesh’ of the world provide a stimulating basis for an understanding of the mental essence and functioning of works of art and architecture. He expresses the existential contents of art convincingly: “How would the painter or poet express anything other than his encounter with the world?” (3:82) How could an architect do otherwise, we might ask with equal justification. Like painting and poetry, architecture is engaged in articulating and expressing the human existential experience. The art of architecture creates spatial and material metaphors of our fundamental existential encounters. The fact that today’s constructed settings most often do not seem to have a meaning speaks clearly of our disturbed sense of being-in-the-world. An architectural metaphor is a highly abstracted and condensed ensemble that fuses the multitude of human experiences into a singular image. The most potent of these images continue to structure the course of civilization, and to make history conceivable. Even today’s necrophilic architectural images are explicit metaphors, but of an alarming nature.

Karsten Harries, professor of philosophy at Yale

University, reiterating Bachelard's view of the mental role of architecture, writes:

Architecture helps to replace meaningless reality with a theatrically, or rather architecturally, transformed reality, which draws us in and, as we surrender to it, grants us an illusion of meaning ... we cannot live with chaos. Chaos must be transformed into cosmos. ... When we reduce the human need for shelter to a material need, we lose sight of what we can call the ethical function of architecture. (4:47, 51)

A building is not an end in itself. It alters our experience of reality; a building frames, articulates, structures, relates, separates and unites, facilitates and prohibits. Deep architectural images are acts instead of objects. As a consequence of this implied action, a bodily reaction is an inseparable aspect of the experience of architecture. A meaningful architectural experience is not simply a series of retinal images. The 'elements' of architecture are not visual units or *gestalt*; they are confrontations. A building is encountered; it is approached, confronted, related to one's body, moved about, utilized as a condition for other things, etc. Architecture directs, scales and frames actions, perceptions and thoughts.

Consequently, the basic architectural experiences seem to have a *verb* form rather than being *nouns*. Authentic architectural experiences consist, for instance, of approaching or confronting a building rather than the formal apprehension of a facade; of the act of entering, not the appreciation of the visual image of the door; of looking in or out of a window, rather than the window itself.

Buildings relate us to the world in particular ways, and they redefine our being-in-the-world, both in terms of space and time. Architecture makes the continuum of space and the flow of time conceivable to the human mind.

The House and the Body

The authenticity of architectural experience is founded in the tectonic language of building and the comprehensibility of the act of construction to the senses. We behold, touch, listen and measure the world with our entire bodily existence, and the experiential world is organized and articulated around the centre of the body. Our domicile is the refuge of the body, memory and identity. We are in constant dialogue and interaction with the environ-

ment, to the degree that it is impossible to detach the image of the Self from its spatial and situational context. "I am the space, where I am," as the poet Noël Arnaud states (2:137).

There is a vivid unconscious resonance, correspondence and identification between our images of the house and of our own body, with its sense organs and metabolism. The house is a metaphor of the body, and the body is a metaphor of the house.

Place and event, space and mind, are not external to each other. Mutually defining each other, they fuse inevitably into a singular experience. The mind is in the world and the world exists through experience. Experiencing a space or a house is a dialogue, a kind of exchange. – I place myself in the space and the space settles in me. Writers and artists, born phenomenologists, intuitively comprehend this fusion. "Today more than ever I feel that cell no. 461... has remained inside me, becoming the secret of my soul. Today more than ever I feel like a bird that has swallowed his cage. I take my cell with me, inside me, as a pregnant woman carries her baby in her womb," writes Curzio Malaparte of the harsh memory of his prison experience (5). Rainer Maria Rilke internalizes the memory of a house of childhood in a surprisingly similar fashion:

Afterwards I never again saw that remarkable house ... it is no complete building: it is all broken up inside me; here a room, there a room, and here a piece of hallway that does not connect these two rooms but is preserved, as a fragment, by itself. In this way it is all dispersed within me – the rooms, the stairways that descended with such ceremonious deliberation, and other narrow, spiral stairs in the obscurity of which one moved as blood does in the veins ... all that is still in me and will never cease to be in me. It is as though the picture of this house had fallen into me from an infinite height and had shattered against my very ground (6:30–31).

Various parts of the house have their resonance with the human body. Windows are the fragile eyes of the house, observing the world and inspecting visitors. The eyes of the house pre-select and preview the landscape for the human eyes. The world seen through a window is a tamed and domesticated world. A view through a window has already been given a specific meaning. A thunderstorm or a snowstorm loses its fearfulness when viewed through the window of a house. The house provides protection for the dreamer, but windows enable him/her to dream. The polarized and

darkened windowpanes of contemporary houses, however, are eyes blinded by some horrible illness; these are malicious eyes that secretly control the inhabitants themselves.

The front door resists my body by its very weight, it ritualizes entry, and makes me anticipate the rooms behind it. Opening a door is an intimate encounter between the house and the body; my body meets the mass and surface of the door, and the door handle, polished to a sheen by countless generations, gives a welcoming handshake. The automated glass doors of today make the entry physically convenient, but strip the act of any existential meaning. Excessive convenience and functionalization dilute meaning. A proper door simultaneously protects and invites, it mediates gestures of secrecy and welcome, courtesy and dignity. "How concrete everything becomes in the world of the spirit when an object, a mere door, can give images of hesitation, temptation, desire, security, welcome and respect," writes Bachelard perceptively (2:224).

The Physiognomy of the Staircase

In one of his lectures, (7:99) Alvar Aalto recalls that one of the worst punishments in Dante's *Inferno* was a stair that had the wrong proportions. The proper dimensioning of the stair has been the concern of architectural theorists since Vitruvius of Roman times and the Renaissance theorists Leon Battista Alberti and Andrea Palladio. The rule of thumb in today's architectural practice is simple enough for any architect to follow: $2 \times \text{the height of the riser} + \text{the width of the tread} = 63 \text{ cm}$. Yet, this practical rule only guarantees a certain average physical comfort. A dull stair makes the body feel heavy and clumsy, whereas a delightful stair makes one glide up or down graciously and effortlessly. This qualitative difference is just as much a result of architectural ambience as of metric differences. Architecture relativizes physical measures and scales.

The fundamental imagery of stairs has remained practically unchanged since prehistoric times. Although its dimensioning is severely restricted, the architectural stair ensembles of history project a surprising variety. Just think of the range of staircases from medieval castles, and Renaissance and baroque palaces to the designs of contemporary masters like Mies van der Rohe, Arne Jacobsen and

Alvar Aalto. The imagery of stepped streets is equally varied, from the Mediterranean vernacular towns to the Lipetta and Spanish Steps, and the stairways of Santa Maria in Aracoeli and the Capitoline Hill in Rome. A stepped street gives a feeling of safety; our body knows that these are streets solely for pedestrians. The mental significance and symbolic connotations of stairs are deeply rooted. "The staircase is the symbolic spine of the house," writes the British-American film critic and semiotist Peter Wollen (8:15). Stairs have the same significance to the vertical organization of the house as the spine to the structure of the body. Do we not experience today's office blocks, in which the staircases are concealed and used only for emergencies, as unreal and dreamlike as if they were devoid of the proper physiognomy of a house? Are not these buildings without their proper spines? There are also buildings with externalized spines, for instance Alvar Aalto's *Baker House* dormitory in Boston (1947–48) and the *Pompidou Centre* in Paris (Renzo Piano and Richard Rogers, 1970).

According to Gaston Bachelard, the 'oneiric house' of the mind (2:33–37) has three or four storeys; the middle ones are used for the normal activities of daily life, the attic is reserved for the purpose of storing pleasant memories, which we occasionally wish to revisit, whereas the cellar is meant for hiding unpleasant and frightening memories that we wish to bury forever. The stair mediates between the different metaphysical realms of the house of our dreams.

The Staircase – Device and Symbol

In addition to the door, the stair is that element of architecture which is encountered most concretely and directly by the body. As we ascend or descend a stair, our step measures its dimensions and the hand caresses the smooth surface of the banisters. To be precise, a stair is not an 'architectural element', but rather one of the primary architectural images. Works of art in general are not composed of visual 'elements', they constitute lived images and fantasies underlying our recollections, and the parts always acquire their meaning through the whole, not vice versa.

The staircase is the most important organ of the house. Without this invention our houses would be without floors, cellars and attics. We would remain

as Joë Bousquet's men with only one storey – "He was a man with only one storey; he had his cellar in his attic" (2:26). As our modern houses have lost their attics and their cellars, they have also lost their memory; most of our houses have forgotten the mytho-poetic ground of architectural experience. The escalator and the elevator of the mechanical age maximize physical comfort, but these technical inventions eliminate a central metaphoric ingredient of the house. One of the tasks of architecture is to reinforce and articulate the verticality of the human experience of the world, but the inhabited towers of our age, served by mechanized stairs, have degenerated back to mere horizontality. A modern tower is a stack of plates creating a sense of abstracted horizontality, alienated from gravity and earth. Today's planning regulations, which aim at helping the handicapped, tend to eliminate steps of the townscape and public buildings altogether, and thus deprive architecture of one of its most powerful expressive means. We are all becoming handicapped. Gustave Flaubert's exclamation, "Architects, all idiots; they always forget to put stairs in the houses" (9:244), assumes a new significance here. In contrast to today's stairless towers Pieter Brueghel the Elder's *The Tower of Babel* (1563) is a man-made mountain, hollowed out into countless chambers, connected by a labyrinth of stairs.

An intriguing special case of the stairless house is a multi-storey house with a vanishing staircase. In Pierre Chareau's *Maison de Verre* in Paris (1931) the stair from the dayroom (petit salon) leading to the master bedroom above folds against the ceiling and turns invisible by means of a complicated pivoting and balancing mechanism. Arne Korsmo devised a similar vanishing stair between the living room and bedrooms on the floor above in his house on Planetveien in Oslo (1953–55). The image of a vanishing stair evokes a sense of secrecy and hiding but also an air of amnesia and an artificially extracted organ. The mechanistic gadgets of the *Maison de Verre* are related to the gynaecologist owner's medical devices and instruments, and they also evoke the image of a bachelor-machine.

Stairs are responsible for the vertical circulation of the house in the same way as the heart keeps pumping blood up and down the body. The regular rhythm of the stairs echoes the beating of the heart and the rhythm of breathing. Ascending a stair

makes our heartbeat and breathing faster. Steep stairs address the heart, whereas gentle stairs echo the rhythm of our lungs.

According to Sigmund Freud the regular rhythm of stairs also addresses our dream imagery through its essence as a sexual metaphor. The fact that certain words related with climbing stairs, like to mount and to tread also signify copulation, lends support to Freud's analysis of dream symbolism. Freud commented on the sexual content of dreams of stairs already at the turn of the century (see 10). His later formulation of these observations makes the sexual symbolism of ascending stairs explicit:

We ... began to turn our attention to the appearance of steps, staircases and ladders in dreams, and were soon in a position to show that staircases (and analogous things) were unquestionably symbols of copulation. It is not hard to discover the basis of the comparison: we come to the top in a series of rhythmical movements and with increasing breathlessness and then, with a few rapid leaps, we can get to the bottom again. Thus the rhythmical pattern of copulation is reproduced in going upstairs. (11:355)

A phenomenological survey of architecture does not, however, seem to support this sexual content of the stair imagery. René Allendy suggests another gender reading of the two directions of the staircase: "Man climbs the stairs (activity), woman comes down them (passivity)" (12). Marcel Duchamp's seminal painting *Nude Descending a Staircase* (1912) and Rita Hayworth's seducing descent of a staircase in *Gilda* (1946) lend support to Allendy's observation.

Bachelard notes that the dream of the staircase is closely related with the dreams of flight and falling. On the other hand, these are two of the basic oneiric images. "Of all metaphors, metaphors of flight, elevation, depth, sinking and fall are the axiomatic metaphors par excellence. Nothing explains them, and they explain everything", he writes. (13:10).

The fear of falling in dreams does not arise from the terror of hitting the ground, but from the fear of not hitting firm ground at all. Significantly, Lucifer, cast out of heaven in Milton's *Paradise Lost* falls for nine days.

Symbolic Stairs

The purely metaphoric, symbolic or conceptual purposes of a stair can even be more important than



Fig. 1. Pyramid of the Magician, Uxmal. Templer, John. *The Staircase*. Cambridge, Mass., London, The MIT Press, 1994.

its practical function. Throughout the ages, the stair has represented cosmological ideas and spiritual aspirations, power and authority, prestige and status, hierarchy and classification. Steps and stairs conventionally symbolize the ascent to a higher spiritual plane, closer to Heaven. Climbing steps reflects an archetypal psychic longing to approach the heavenly sphere of the cosmos. The temples of ancient cultures are often terraced to create an image of gigantic stairs, as for instance the ziggurat of Mesopotamia, Stoup of south Asian Buddhism, and the pyramids of ancient Mexico (Fig. 1). The temples of ancient Greece were built on a terraced formation to create a sense of elevation. This idea of an elevated terrace, approached by a great flight of steps, reappeared in contemporary architecture through the work of Jørn Utzon, most notably in his Sydney Opera House. Also Alvar Aalto frequently used the symbolic effect of an artificially elevated ground level, a man-made hill-town, for instance, in his town halls at Säynätsalo and Seinäjoki.

In the symbolism of Freemasonry, the steps depicted in allegorical tapestries represent degrees of initiation. Three steps correspond to moderation, justice, and benevolence. Seven steps represent the seven liberal arts of the medieval world, the seven

ages of man, and the seven cardinal virtues, believed to lead to self-knowledge, mastery and improvement. Seven steps also lead up to the philosopher's stone according to alchemical allegory. (14:326)

As architects, we tend to think that stairs are symmetrical in relation to ascending and descending. In the prosaic acts of daily life the two directions may well appear equal. But already the specialized mental functions of the extreme floors of the oneiric house reveal the natural symbolism of above and below. Rising stairs end in Heaven, whereas descending stairs eventually lead down to the Underworld. A characteristic image of the meaning of ascension is the theme of *The Presentation of the Virgin*, a popular subject in Renaissance religious paintings. The ultimate configuration of the ascending stair is expressed in Jacob's dream:

And he dreamed, and behold a ladder set up on the earth, and the top of it reached to heaven; and behold the angels of God ascending and descending on it. And, behold, the Lord stood above it, and said, I am the Lord God of Abraham thy father, and the God of Isaac (Genesis 28:12–13).

Another image of stairs extending to Heaven is the

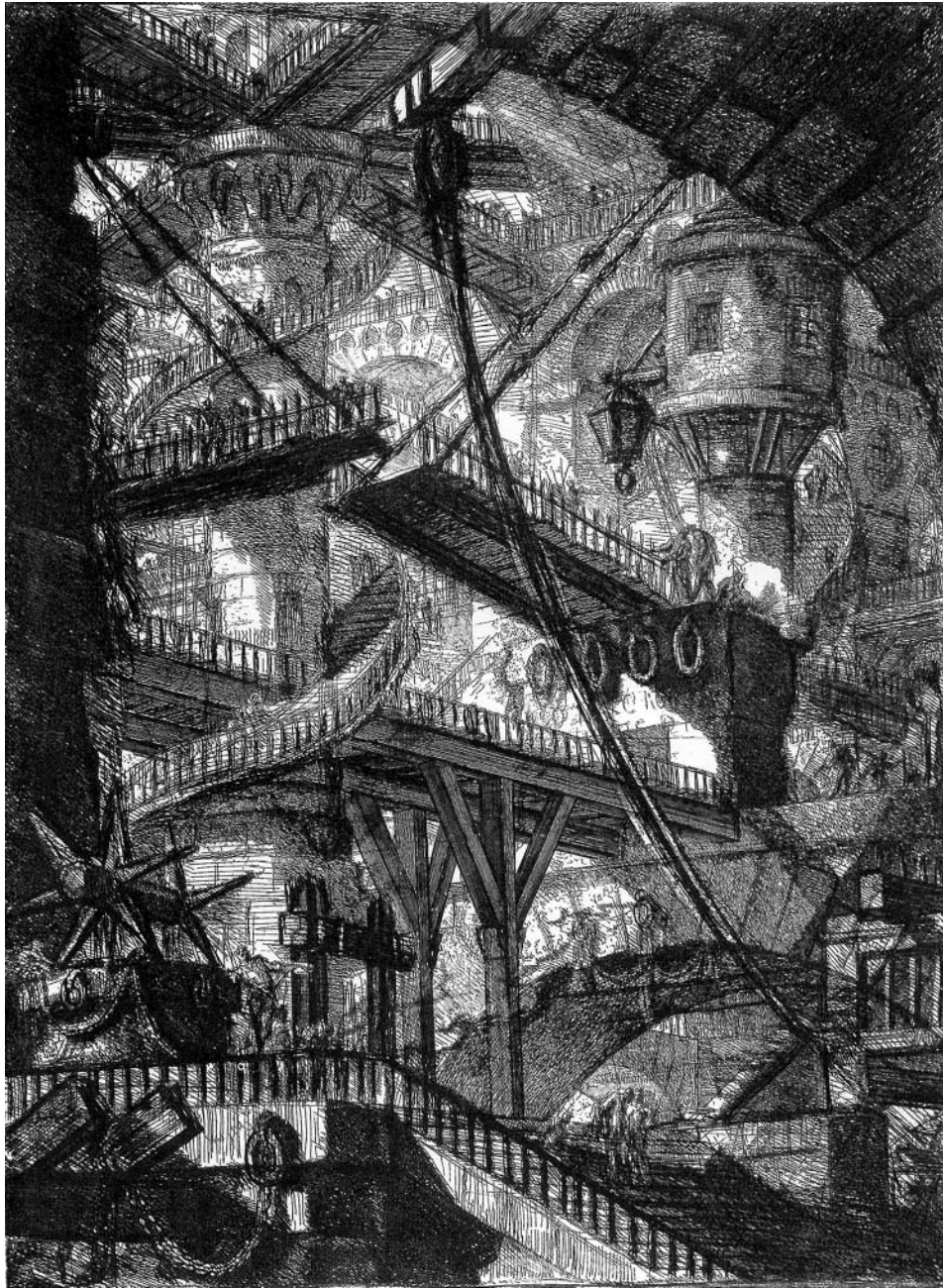


Fig. 2. A vertical labyrinth. Giovanni Battista Piranesi, *Invenzioni capric. di Carceri* (imaginary prison scenes), 1761. (Barrier, Janine, *Piranèse*. Paris: Bibliothèque de l'Image, 1995)

Ladder of Judgement, where the souls climbing the ladder are dragged off by devils and fall into the mouth of Hell.

Stairs as Vertical Labyrinths

The horizontal, vertical and diagonal directions are

interconnected in the design of a staircase, and this formal complexity turns it into an architectural miniature, a microcosm, and an abstracted and condensed house within a house. The image of a staircase resembles that of the labyrinth; a staircase is a vertical labyrinth. A staircase can mediate the experience of getting lost, losing one's balance or even one's mind. The endlessly criss-crossing

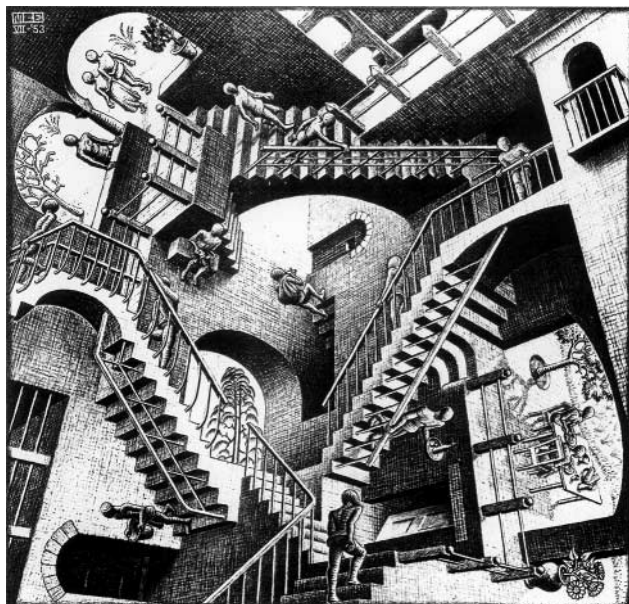


Fig. 3. An endless stair of vertigo. M. C. Escher, *Relativity*, lithograph, 1953. (Ernst, Bruno, *The Magic Mirror of M. C. Escher*. New York: Ballantine Books, 1976)

stairs in the prison scenes of Giovanni Battista Piranesi's *Carceri* drawings (c. 1745) (Fig. 2) create a spatial labyrinth which permits no exit; the haunted prisoners are doomed forever to ascend and descend this endless maze. M. C. Escher's drawings of 'impossible' staircases that simultaneously lead upwards and downwards, creating endless loops, are further examples of labyrinthine stairs (Fig. 3). The impossibility of actual descent or ascension creates an experience of hopelessness and suffocation. Ascending the confined and claustrophobic flight of steps into the Pharaoh's burial chamber, half way up the great pyramid of Gize, actually turns into a paradoxical descent into Hades. Interestingly enough, Bachelard interprets the imagination of the fall as an *inverted ascent* (13:15).

The library labyrinth in Jorge Luis Borges' short story *The Library of Babylon* creates a similar dizzying density of spaces, an architectural mist as it were, without a beginning, direction, or end:

Also through here passes a spiral stairway, which sinks abysmally and soars upwards to remote distances ... they always arrive extremely tired of their journeys; they speak of a broken stairway which almost killed them; they talk with the librarian of galleries and stairs (15:78, 82).

Cinematic Stairs

Staircases and stairways play a particularly important role in cinematic dramaturgy. Stairs form simultaneously a stage and an auditorium. The staircases of cinema reveal their innate asymmetry. Climbing stairs implies exiting the social stage and withdrawal into privacy, but it can also signal movement into a prohibited realm, a way to disclose the secret, or the final journey to purification, judgement or amnesty.

Descending a stairway to the main floor in films is usually related to entry into the public sphere and self-presentation. Curving stairs are particularly popular in cinema because they can present the descent of the protagonist first as a distant side view and finally as a close frontal view. Descending a staircase into a cellar signifies the entry into the realm of fear and menace. Stairs in films are most often photographed upwards from below, so an ascending person is consequently seen from behind and a descending character from the front. Stairs photographed from above express vertigo, falling or panic-stricken flight. This preference for showing staircases from below has its natural technical reasons – a stairway photographed from above seems to escape the picture – but this very fact reveals the psychological difference between the ascending and descending movements. The Odessa Steps sequence in Sergei Eisenstein's *The Battleship Potemkin*, the spiralling stairs of anguish in Fritz Lang's *M for Murder* and the stairwell leading to the bell loft in Alfred Hitchcock's *Vertigo* (Fig. 4) are memorable examples of the cinematic dramatics of stairs. Why are the stairs in Hitchcock's films invariably to the right of the entrance door as seen by the entering person? Is it because the staircase stands for the heart of the house and consequently its proper location is to the left from the central axis?

Stairs of Hierarchy and Classification

Steps and stairs create a metaphor or instrument of hierarchical classification. In *Liber de Ascensu et Descensu Intellectus*, the medieval Christian mystic Ramon Lull depicts the act of creation as a stair of ascent and descent. Each step represents one stage in the creation, ranging from the inanimate rock at the bottom to the flora, wild animals, humans, firmament, angels, and finally, God and the House of Wisdom at the top (16:7).

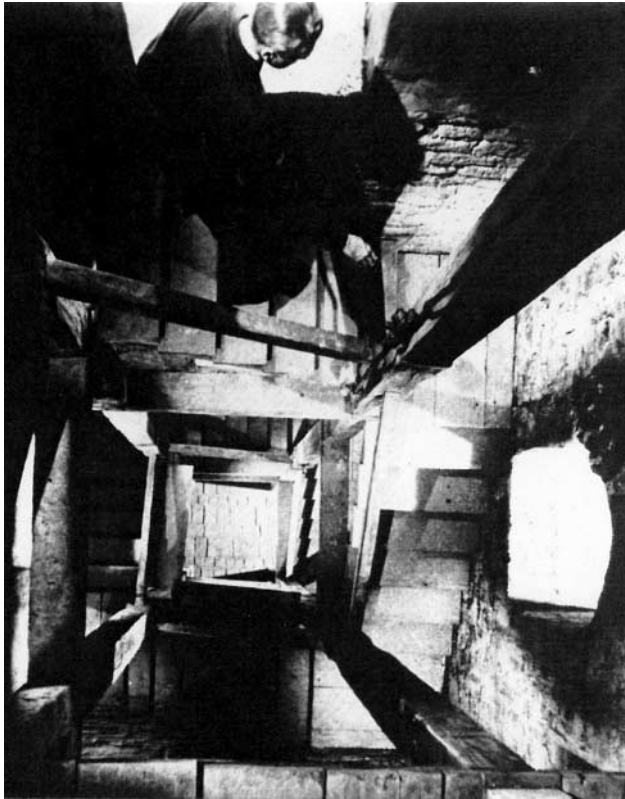


Fig. 4. A stair of terror. Alfred Hitchcock, *Vertigo* (1958). The vertical labyrinthine stair leading to the bell loft. (Humphries Patrick, *The Films of Alfred Hitchcock*. London: Bison Books, 1987)

Interestingly enough, the same imagery appears in the cosmology of the Dogon in Mali.¹ The key to the World Order of this legendary tribe is the mythological ark, 'The Granary of the Master of Pure Earth', by means of which the first man, a smith, descended from Heaven to earth. Each of the four sides of the heavenly granary is equipped with a stair of ten steps. As the ark descended in 22 stages along a sevenfold spiral (note the emergence of mathematical wisdom: $22/7$ is an approximation of π), various animal species were placed on the steps; the northern steps contained humans and fish, the southern steps domestic animals, the eastern steps birds, and the western steps wild animals, vegetables and insects. The individual species were placed on the ten steps. For instance, the western steps contained, from the top downwards, antelopes, hyenas, cats (2 steps), reptiles

and lizards, apes, gazelles, marmots, the lion and the elephant. Thus the steps of the ark constituted a primitive classification system of flora and fauna.

Winners of sports events today continue to be awarded on a similar stair of classification.

The Narrative of Stairs

Great works of architecture, as all art, are saturated with images and inducements that direct our attention away from them as physical objects to the metaphysical dimensions of human experience. A great stairway transcends its physicality and functionality and turns into a microcosmic complex of images suggesting an epic narrative.

One of the most deeply touching stairways in the history of architecture is surely Michelangelo's stairhall in the *Biblioteca Laurentiana*, next to the Church of St. Lorenzo in Florence (Fig. 5). The gray stone staircase, detached from the walls of its cubic spatial container, awakens the image of a dark stream solemnly flowing down from the level of the library itself. One can almost hear the rippling of the solitary stream. This is a liquid stairway. The oddly placed consoles of the lower part of the walls and the columns, all but devoured by the walls, create an experience of the pressure of being underwater. The stream turns into an underwater stream. Michelangelo's stairhall speaks of another dimension of time; it speaks of the metaphysics of time. This stairhall expresses the same melancholy, the sorrow of loss, as Michelangelo's moving *pietás*.

Casa Malaparte is the metaphysical house of the Italian writer Curzio Malaparte, overhanging the sheer cliffs in Punta Massulla on the Isle of Capri, made known outside the architectural profession by Jean-Luc Godard's film *Le Mepris* (1963). A straight flight of ever-widening steps leads to the roof terrace hovering over the Mediterranean, half way between the earth and the sky (Fig. 6). The absence of any kind of balustrades or handrails creates a feeling of fear and vertigo. The stairway is simultaneously part of the cliff and part of the house, but it belongs to the sky. It induces an experience of breathtaking beauty, flight, levitation, and the suffocating fear of falling. It makes one think of the tragic myth of Icarus, and the journeys of Ulysses across the sea below. But it also makes one recall the maidens sacrificed to the

¹ The astonishing Dogon cosmogony is impressively documented in Marcel Griaule. *Conversations with Ogotemmeli – An Introduction to Dogon Religious Ideas* (17)

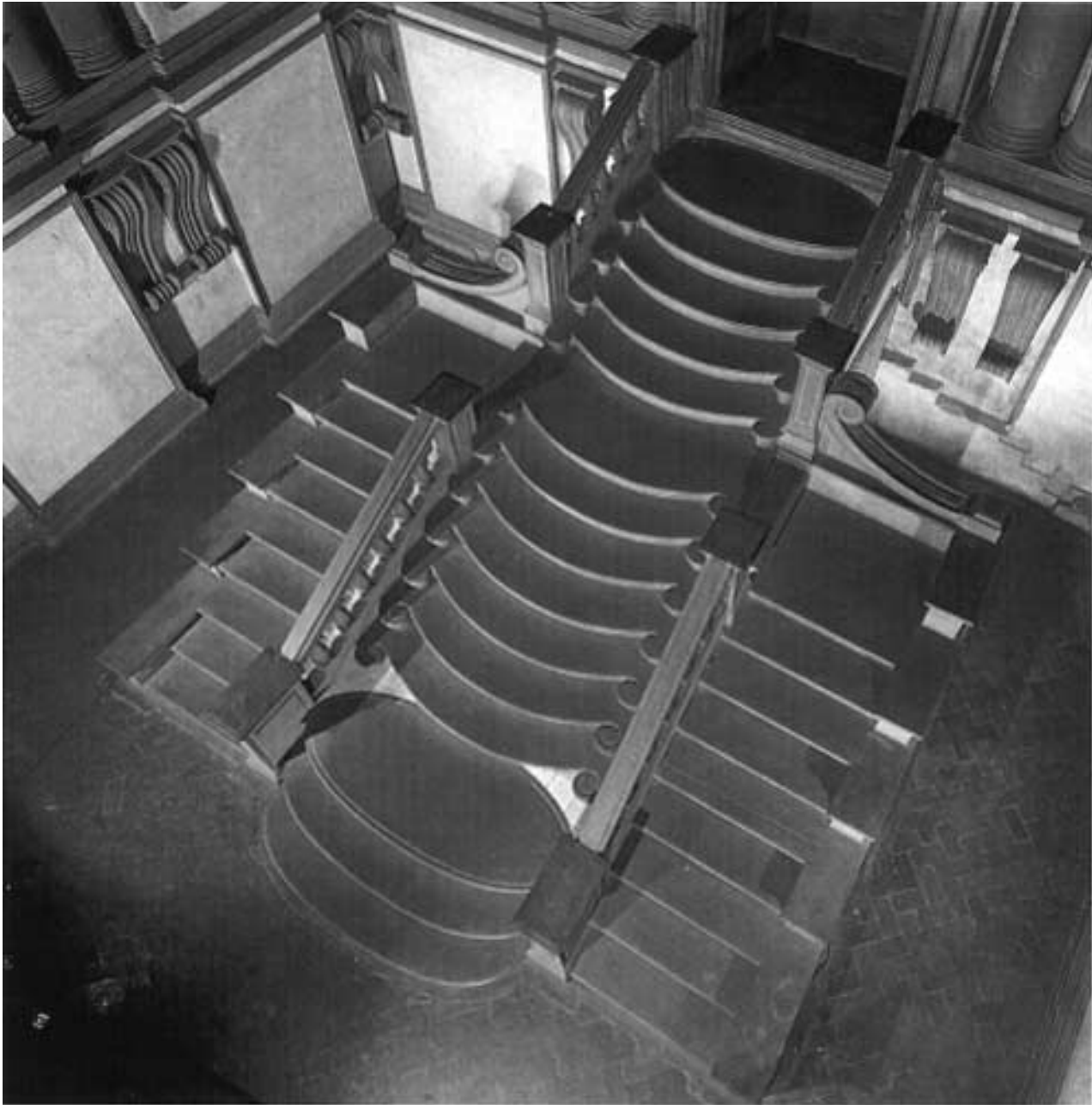


Fig. 5. Stairs of Melancholy. Michelangelo, The Staircase of the Laurentian Library, Florence, 1524–57. (Heusinger, Lutz, *Michelangelo*. Florence: Scala, 1989)

Sun God at the top of the endless flight of steps of an Aztec pyramid. This is unavoidably the stage of Divine Judgement.

The Re-Enchantment of Architecture

It is a common experience today that the buildings

and townscapes of our time lack a spiritual and emotional content. The sense of emptiness, distance and rejection derives from the inability of modern settings to resonate with the unconscious contents of the human mind. The architecture of modern times has normalized human emotions, and consequently is unable to reflect their extremes, like ecstasy and melancholy. A work of art



Fig. 6. A stair of judgement. Curzio Malaparte, Adalberto Libera, *Casa Malaparte*, Capri, 1938–40. (Photo Markku Komonen)

and architecture can touch our soul only if it touches something familiar in our collective memory. Technical ingenuity, novelty, formal inventiveness, or mere aspiration for aesthetic pleasure cannot move us. “Meaning cannot finally be made or invented; it can only be discovered, where such discovery will also be a self-discovery”

(4:47), as Karsten Harries acknowledges. The art of architecture elaborates existential themes, which echo the primordial depths of human experience. “Architectural forms are a language confined to the joining of a few ideographs of immense ramification” (18), writes the British art essayist Adrian Stokes, who viewed works of

architecture and art through a psychoanalytic understanding.

As the human existential experience keeps drifting towards placelessness, insignificance and the absence of hierarchy, one of the most demanding tasks of architecture is to resist this erosion of mental value and experience. At the turn of the millennium the great challenge for us architects is the re-sensualization, re-mythologization and re-poetization of the human domicile. The task of architecture is to resist the processes of mental entropy.

One of the symptoms of alienation in the modern age is the widespread sense of meaninglessness ... Modern man's most urgent need is to discover the reality and value of the inner subjective world, to discover the symbolic life ... The symbolic life in some form is a prerequisite for psychic health',

writes the psychologist E. F. Edinger, and this advice ought to be taken seriously by the architectural profession (19:107, 109, 117).

Is it conceivable that once again stairs could reawaken our awareness of Heaven and Hell?

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Summaries in German and Spanish

Pallasmaa J. Stufen des Geistes

Unsere materialistische Zivilisation hat Bauten zu Gebrauchsgegenständen ohne jeden sinnlichen Inhalt gemacht. Sie sollten aber unsere Seelen, Träume und Erfahrungen behaushalten. Auch Architektur bringt die *Conditio humana* zum Ausdruck. Belebter Raum und gelebter Geist entsprechen einander. Architektur Erfahrung läßt sich leichter als Geschehnis beschreiben denn als Gegebenheit. Eines der wichtigsten Elemente ist dabei die Treppe mit ihren metaphorischen und symbolischen Bedeutungen. Sie erscheint auch in der Literatur, im Film und in der Malerei. Vielleicht kommt es einmal wieder so weit, daß Treppen wieder die Existenz von Himmel und Hölle zum Ausdruck bringen.

Pallasmaa J. Escaleras de la mente

Nuestra cultura materialista ha convertido los edificios en objetos de utilidad desprovistos de cualquier contenido mitopoético. Sin embargo además de proveer refugio físico, los edificios pueden dar cabida a nuestras almas, memorias y sueños. Como todo arte la arquitectura, expresa la condición existencial humana, nuestro espacio vivido y la mente, definiendo cada uno recíprocamente. La arquitectura aborda el cuerpo y es una experiencia multisensorial. Las experiencias arquitectónicas fundamentales son encuentros que aparecen mas como verbos que como nombres. Una de las imágenes más poderosa dentro de la arquitectura es la escalera, la cual plantea una abundancia de connotaciones metafóricas y simbólicas. La escalera es la columna vertebral simbólica de la casa, mientras que el ascenso y descenso deriva de las imágenes del cielo y el infierno. Las escaleras aparecen frecuentemente en la literatura, cine y pintura debido al poder de imagen extraordinario. La escalera representa también la configuración vertical de un laberinto con las consecuentes asociaciones de vértigo y de poder perderse. Nuestra realidad humana ha empezado a ser amenazantemente concreta y dimensional y como el ambiente ha perdido su dimensión simbólica. Una de las tareas mas encomendadas a los arquitectos hoy en día es remitologizar y repotizar el ambiente de la construcción. ¿Es posible que las escaleras pudieran expresar una vez más la existencia del cielo y el infierno?