

David M. Foxe  
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Prof. Sennett  
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Unequal vertical elevation is one of the few universal traits of sites across the earth. Not all places use comparable measures of distance and time, vegetation and climate varies widely, and the horizontal area and organization of settlements exhibits great variation. But the condition of elevation makes some places inevitably higher than others: we can measure whether the land or a built surface are on the same plane, or if one is higher and one is lower.

Parallel to this, the struggle against gravity is ubiquitous; aside from negligible variation of a few microseconds due to the distance from the center of the earth to differing heights on the earth's crust or while flying in the air, we and our environment are constantly subject to 9.8 meters per second squared of gravitational acceleration. Ever since Galileo and his contemporaries showed that all objects fall at the same rate of acceleration regardless of material and "natural state" or divine ordination, gravitational attraction has been understood as a great equalizer that does not discriminate.

Yet when the force of gravity and variety in elevation conspire, the resulting effects are hardly neutral. Water flows down and fills valleys and marshes with nutrients and irrigation; floodwaters accumulate in low ground and the high ground peaks above deluges, remaining dry. Cumulonimbus clouds form as air traverses mountain ranges, weather systems spin their spiraling trajectories across the globe. Elevation changes as monumental as mountain ranges divide settlements, cultures, nations, and peoples. Even if one's physical displacement remains zero in crossing a mountain or a ravine – that is, if the start and end are at the same numerical elevation – the geography still causes great strain to physically fighting gravity and the stability of being on sloping land, ascending and traversing such inequalities. Difficulty of access means that the physical inequality directly implies and causes unequal opportunity for movement, use of resources, and other aspects of human life.

Therefore while transportation may have made horizontal distances far easier to traverse, and elevators and escalators and even simple machines provide mechanical means of ascending and descending, we cannot ignore the varying elevation of our settlements and the gravity of their consequences. Those places on the same plane are immeasurably more accessible and proximal and ready to hand than those that require ascending or descending. Our own plane is our frame of reference, determining whether we see a glacially molded landscape as a group of equal planes with fissures between, or the view from those incised lowland corridors walled on either side.

The condition of being elevated brings increased amounts of territory to visibility, while the opposite situation in low ground means being overseen from higher places. The reciprocity of surveying from above and being visible from below supports the impulse for monuments and places of power to capitalize upon and be exaggerated by placing human constructions atop naturally elevated topography.

Even when physical elevation is not possible, conventions of language enable us to speak of “moral” high ground to avoid taking the “low road” in a situation. Similarly, finding oneself “in a hole” makes reaching the “top of the heap” similarly challenging. “High street retail” occurs regardless of the location’s elevation, even if the goods for sale are in an establishment that seems “beneath” the shopper’s desired level. In a capitalist society where innate differences of status and class tend to be verbally smoothed over so that everyone aspires to be some form of “middle class,” even that English term in its French and German origins derives directly from the urban businessmen and artisans who dwelt not on the top of the hill or mountain in a central palace, nor outside the city in the fertile, protected agricultural valleys, but in the middle.

At the intersection of physical and social topographies, ups and downs are not merely a consequence of personal description or of simple scenic variety. Rather, they are fundamental to the way in which we conceive our world and operate within it. While traditional ritual topographies of civic and sacred events have lost their currency in many places, along with the analogy of earth’s surface as a level plane midway between paradise above and damnation below in literal physical terms, elevation still *connotes*. The social, physical, and mental definition of locations as both spaces and places, requires the information of relationships to surrounding land. Even if the vertical axis no longer implies a vertical teleology, the subtleties of topographic variation do a great deal to determine the desirability of real estate, the potential risk of settlement, the many natural and human systems which our built environment capitalizes upon or struggles against. Topography informs many relationships and consequences, which become manifest tacitly as local knowledge and memory of what has happened in a place over time, of why certain social relationships, equalities and inequalities correspond or contrast the physical land. In this capacity the descriptive capacity of *topography* moves toward the analysis and knowledge of *topology*, as a way of linking the ground (topos) and the language (logos) surrounding our places and relationships in the world.