

With Feet Firmly Planted on Unstable Ground

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Looking Down

In *Stories of Mr Keuner*, Bertolt Brecht (2001, 9) told of a man who was indifferent to the politics of state identity. Mr Keuner dismissed the idea of belonging to one place, and even though he lived in a city occupied by an enemy army, he put no pride in the rights of citizenship. One day, walking along the street, he found himself faced by one of the foreign soldiers, and following social expectations, he stepped from the footpath into the gutter, allowing the soldier to pass. In doing so, Mr K was momentarily remade with nationalistic fervour and genocidal fantasy, wishing to wipe this soldier's country from the face of the earth. In the story, the Bavarian-born Brecht drew on the connotations of the nineteenth-century German footpath, the *Bürgersteig*, which literally means the 'citizen's step', a ground to be trodden by those deemed to rightfully belong to the place. Being forced from the citizen's step revealed to Mr K his disenfranchisement; and as his unconscious symbol of belonging was taken, he responded with a desire to strip the soldier and his country of origin of any right to a place on the earth. The message I take from this story is that ground surfaces can have great resonance. Where one stands is invested with symbolic meaning that defines who one is able to be.

Physically, all human spaces are equally composed of a ground plane (the field, the street, the floor), a vertical plane (the façade, the wall), and a roof plane (the ceiling, the sky), yet in many discourses of design there is a clear planar hierarchy. In practice, the ground plane holds important material and experiential qualities, but many texts on spatial design suggest the primacy of walls. For example, Francis Ching (1996, 120) states that in defining interiors, 'vertical forms have greater presence in our visual field than horizontal planes and are therefore more instrumental'. His focus on the vertical plane is by extension an emphasis on the visual barriers of space. Katherine Benzel (1998, 239) gives more value to the floor as a binding agent for walls and structure, yet there is still the implication that really the latter are the more important elements.

If this sounds like a trivial concern, we should look at how this focus on vertical planes infuses our theories of architecture's social operation. Our understanding of social spaces is most commonly framed through the division of community and individuality and

expressed through the binary of the public exterior where the person hides within the group, and the private interior where they reveal themselves (see Rice 2007; Sparke 2008). The common adoption in architectural discourse of Georg Simmel's work on the detached observer of the industrial city streets (Sennett 2012, 38), and Walter Benjamin's (2002, 220) musings on the collector and the soft and pliable interior residence 'as a receptacle for the person', illuminate the division. This conception of social space is architecturally defined through walls that contain or expose. If looking to the ground seems odd, it is perhaps because we are already so swayed by the allure of walls. The story of Mr K implies there can also be powerful divisions of social space operating without visual distinction, and that the ground plane presents another opportunity to view how people relate to each other through their physical environment.

My aim is to explore the various ways people have discussed the ground plane in its social sense. 'Ground' is used as a general term referring to all types of lower horizontal plane, but as Brecht's story implies, distinctions are of vital consequence in this area, so I begin to unfold different categories of ground. I concentrate on what I refer to as 'earth' and 'floor', which I suggest should not be limited to physical surfaces, but are to be read as symbols invested with meaning. The purpose of categorization is to define what these meanings are and how they explicitly or intuitively guide occupation, which is the manner in which people organize themselves in a spatial context.

Connected Surfaces

The ground is fundamental in orienting spatial experience, providing a divided continuity that ties together countryside, city streets and interior as we step from one surface to another. Ground links spaces when walls divide them. Giambattista Nolli's famous 1748 illustration, the *Pianta Grande di Roma* (or the Nolli Plan) clearly illustrates one common division of the ground plane. Through black and white solids it demarcates Rome's streets and interiors, though since church interiors are combined with the public streets the map's organizing logic cannot be a simple division of inside and outside. The map is composed according to access – places of congregation and retreat. As a starting point, the ground can initially be divided into two general categories that follow current understandings of public and private space: the floor of the interior, and that which it directly covers: the earth itself.

Christopher Alexander (1977, 1009) refers to these categories of earth and floor, proposing their inherent connection. To explain the effect of the interior floor he describes its strong foundations in the earth, and how through these foundations the floor draws on the earth to provide stability in the home. 'Stability' is not used simply for its structural sense, it is the romantic image of the home as an enduring symbol in the occupant's mind – this is the image of home popularly found in the work of Bachelard (1994) and Heidegger (1971, 143–59). Linguist Marie Stenglin (2004, 252), in her study of museum spaces, similarly describes the floor as anchored in earth, a connection that transfers 'roundedness' and 'stability' into the floor, and fosters the interior's sense of comfort and

continuity. Foundations bind floor to earth, therefore connecting the individual home to the enduring landscape.

This line of thinking defines earth and floor as forming a unity, though the interior's social power is ultimately derived from the earth below, and it is seemingly powerless on its own. The private interior is presented not as an escape from the public exterior, but as a product of it. These arguments of stability suggest that the fundamental power of the ground resides in the primary category of earth. But what exactly does 'earth' mean in this case? Is it the soil, the field or the natural plane? Is it the public ground of the city? It seems that to develop understandings of other kinds of ground surface we first need to look at this idea called earth.

Earth

In relation to social spaces, reference to earth frequently revolves around notions of common ground, community, and long-standing historical tradition. The earth is utilized as a metaphor for the continuation of culture. Taking on this theme of earth, Neil Leach (1998, 33) wrote:

Identity ... becomes territorialized and mapped on geographic terrain. The individual becomes one with the land in a process of identification which is itself mythic Thus we find constant references to natural phenomena – storms, blood, and soil – in fascist ideology It is precisely in the context of an identity rooted to the soil that those groups not rooted to the soil become excluded.

Earth is being shaped into a symbol of archetypal socialization, where individuals first relate to location, and through this to other people. A society's identity is closely linked to terrain, or the earth to which groups believe themselves entitled. From this, two contradictory ideas occur: the earth is common ground for all; it is also exclusive, where divisions clarify status and entitlement, as with any kind of border control. As the codified earth becomes demarcated, different types of ground develop, like the gutter and the footpath in Brecht's story. These distinctions in public earth separate the larger society, but can also work to bind groups through their common ground. This essential reading of the earth guided Alexander's comment on the rooted floor, receiving its power by proxy from the earth below. The floor of the individual's home partitions a small space for restricted use, but is still tied into the larger landscape of a people and based on its solidarity and order, showing us that the symbol of the earth looms heavily in how we understand our place in the world.

As it is formed into an idea of belonging, the earth is therefore not a physical surface but a kind of representation, and as a symbolic device it holds great power when used to remind people where they belong. We might consider how the symbol of earth is used in the design of the Platz der Republik – outside the German Reichstag in Berlin – which is part of the Federal Strip plan by landscape architects Axel Schultes and Charlotte Frank. The design is an elegant example of illusion and symbolic meaning. In plan, or from the air, the landscape stretching west of the Reichstag is a series of strips of grass and paving that alternatively reduce and increase in width. To the west it is bounded by a field and to

the east by a paved forecourt. From above, these are discrete elements; but from the ground, viewed in perspective, the two types of earth visually blend into each other. The paved earth of the German parliament (and by extension its people) appears to rise out of the natural greenery representing Germany's fundamental earth. The house of parliament concludes this rising, which evocatively seems to come out of the earth, and therefore express the territorialization of nationhood. In the same city, a little to the east, Libeskind's garden at the Jewish Museum defiles the grass with streaks of bitumen. This violent act marks the memory of the Holocaust, and a blight on the rhetoric of common earth and the right to belong.

The Reichstag itself, representing the unified German nation, was described by Norman Foster (2000, 10) in his redesign of the building as a 'museum of memories'. If earth is identity and belonging territorialized, then as it extends beyond the individual it also extends beyond the present time. The public ground of the earth is often attributed with the ability to contain a people's history, thus placing it as an accumulation of time and memory. As Kevin Lynch (1960, 4) wrote, landscapes are the 'skeleton' on which people establish their 'socially important myths'. Edward Casey (1996, 25) furthered the idea when he asserted that memories belong as much to place as to the brain or body. In both comments, earth is presented as physically manifesting the collective memory theorized in the early twentieth century by Maurice Halbwachs (1992, 51). A student of Durkheimian sociology, Halbwachs argued that a process of common remembering is one of the strongest bonds that hold people together; the earth is often treated as collective memory made concrete, retaining the marks of the past and providing people with an ongoing reminder. This has been a recurring theme in urban studies, where the power attributed to the ground is then given cause to be represented in other forms such as monuments or preserved historical façades (Boyer 1994, 4–6). But the idea of historicized and communal earth has also been a device in historiography to understand the experience of history, where earth is made of the mingling *topoi* of distinct historical places (Ethington 2007). In all of these views, the capacity to dwell on common earth links people through the shared struggle of history. Here we begin to risk confusing the earth with other spatial elements that denote historical memory, but it is precisely the way earth is adapted as a synecdochic device to express wider-ranging impressions of time and community that we are looking at. This is about constructed symbolism, and the power invested in the earth when we choose to read our own sociability through this inert mass.

It will be noticed that these discussions of earth range widely in terms of which exact category of ground they describe: they could be the naturalized surfaces of soil and grass, the streets of the city, the public plaza. 'Earth' is here a broad category to capture all of these public grounds and show the similar ideas underpinning them. In this rendition, earth is so abstract it is hardly real at all. There is no unified earth as such, it is a mythic construct whose residue empowers social space. We are dealing with the meaning given to an unattainable surface. It harkens back to an idea of the primitive and unburdened earth on which human beings first gathered and societies first formed, a symbol

summarizing a complex combination of location, events, and people. All sub-categories of ground inherently draw from this popular image of earth and one cannot trace its development from the blank state into what it is today.

Although it is impossible to reach this first and pure earth, we may be able to at least identify within recent history an earth that was culturally meaningless – not the ‘skeleton’ of its people’s identity – but which has since developed the same notions of belonging and collective memory. This example is the British colonization of Australia at the turn of the nineteenth century. To indigenous Australians, earth is of the utmost significance, essentially one with society and religion. Their association with earth reflects very similar patterns of thought to those expressed above. However, the first generations of British in Australia had no ties to that earth; it was a material object to be used for other ends and not the site and product of their cultural identity.

The British colonials’ attitude toward the Australian earth is reflected in the sentiments of Barron Field, Judge Advocate of the early Sydney settlement. Beyond his official function, Field was also a poet, and author of the first poetry book published in the New South Wales colony. He viewed the Australian landscape as having no significance to the British, and therefore a landscape with no history: a ‘prose-dull land’ (Field 1823, 15).

This produced a sense of spiritual isolation, or a lack of belonging. If Australian earth had no history to Field then it was because it was a land ‘without antiquities’ (1823, 11), without historic buildings or remnants of the past that predate the present generation and tie them to history, religion or home. Caught in this sense of isolation and trying to find an alternative to these antiquities, Field (1823, 14–15) transposed the symbolic role of long-standing church architecture onto the ships of Sydney Cove, their ‘tall anch’ring masts, a three-spired minster’. In addition to their visual resemblance to the cathedral for the colonial landscape, they also represented the only way for an Englishman to return to British soil.

Here I am again beginning to drift away from the symbolism of earth and into the extensions of its ideas, but Field had some very particular comments to make about soil, history and the claim to earth. He suggested that the implicit qualities that have been identified in earth are not inherent in the land, but only develop over time as the dead are buried and their graves consecrated with Christian rites. Thus, Field remarks, the British did not claim their ownership over the Australian land with a planted flag, but with the burial of the Scottish man Forby Sutherland in 1770, which began the process of their living and dying on Australian earth:

... and thence a little space
Lies Sutherland, their shipmate, for the sound
Of Christian burial better did proclaim
Possession than the flag, in England’s name ...
Fix then th’ Ephesian brass. ’Tis classic ground. (1823, 16)

In this portrayal the earth gains its representative power of belonging because it contains our ancestors and thus holds a place in our imagination as retaining our pasts, tying us to

particular locations. Over time, physical terrain is shaped as significant places and connections to others. To Field, the only piece of earth to which he could feel connected was Sutherland's burial site – it was the only place in Australia with a story.

Built up slowly over time, the earth accrues notions of stability, operating in a timeframe longer than the individual and providing an enduring point of reference for groups of people. This reading of a mythical earth – a representation of communal belonging in time and space – infuses all of our responses to categories of ground. It shaped Alexander's commentary that the floor's foundations in the earth provide stability in the home. It oriented Leach's comments about the territorialization of identity, and Lynch on the landscape as the skeleton of our social myth-making. It is inherent in Field's poetry and the design of the Platz der Republik. It underpins the realization of ground surfaces in the city streets, and the distinction between the *Bürgersteig* and the gutter. The earth is loaded with symbolic meaning that influences our reading of the social impact of the physical ground plane in spatial design. And hence we return to the well-worn discussion of personality in the nineteenth-century streets, and Simmel's notion that society is a 'mere sum of separate individuals' (1949, 254). In the streets of the expanding modern city, full of strangers, people adopt masks that allow them to blend in, form social bonds and find protection in the group. This is not only because they are left exposed outside of the enclosed walls of the private dwelling; it is also because the public ground they tread connotes this coming together of a larger group character.

Floor

Alexander's view of the floor's meaning fits rather neatly with typical renditions of the concept of earth, but there is also another frequent approach to the floor to be considered. This is oppositional to earth, but no less dependent on it. With the floor we are still in an abstracted category of ground plane, one that includes the many instantiations of (usually) interior surfaces.

To begin to look at this conception of the interior's floor, let's consider the story of the fifth-century religious figure St Simeon Stylites. Living in the eastern Roman Empire between modern-day Turkey and Syria, Stylites practised an extreme form of bodily asceticism, aspiring to amplify physical strain as a method of prayer, and attempting to withdraw from his material involvement with people and the world (Lent 2009, iii). However, he found these acts drew people to him, therefore including him in material society. His question was how to distance himself from physical interaction as a means to pursue religious devotion.

Rather than becoming a hermit in unpopulated territories, Stylites' answer was to disentangle himself from the symbol of social unity: the earth. He appeared to create a distance from the physical earth itself, and thus its symbolism of a collective people and the physicality of social interactions and desires. Finding the ruin of a pillar, four metres high, he chose to live on top of it on a small platform. The top of the pillar was a floor

with no walls or roof, but which nonetheless established a physical division from the earth below and defined a kind of 'interior'. It was not a complete withdrawal; people climbed ladders up to his retreat, bringing him food and seeking counsel or prayers. And as he attracted more attention, he retreated further and further from the earth, on successively higher pillars. By the end of his life Stylites lived on a pillar 20 metres high, and had spent 37 years separated from the earth. When Buñuel portrayed Stylites in his film *Simon of the Desert* (1965), the image of his open-air platform was dwarfed by the desert around it. Despite his vision being dominated by that from which he sought refuge, the act of removing himself from social life and material concern was symbolized through stepping off communal earth and onto artificial floor. The floor established a disjunction that supported the ascetic's mission.

Stylites' hagiography shows an individual defined against the people of the world not through enclosure, but through the horizontal barrier that took him off the earth. The unity of the people is asserted as masses of pilgrims climbed up from (or out of) the earth below, threatening the quietude and individuality of the floor above. This constructs a clear image of the earth as the collective, and the floor as the individual's retreat away from it. It is not a floor that tries to mimic the earth or draw on its cultural power of time, memory and stability; it is a floor that tries to cut itself off, to break from the communal traditions below and live in a different way. For us, Stylites' pillar may be argued to represent the floor that covers the earth, which forgets it and replaces it with something else. If earth holds on to memory and time, this floor is *tabula rasa*.

The Japanese architect Arata Isozaki (1986) has presented a similar impression of the floor as distinction, but in a significantly different context. Isozaki traced the development of Japanese architecture from pit dwellings to raised structures. Beginning with earth, he then defines two specific categories of interior ground, 'board' and 'tatami' (Isozaki 1986, 62–4), which successively remove spaces from common earth by rising above it. Isozaki (1986, 65) writes that 'the raised wooden floor is a clean, artificially created surface isolated from the earth, a surface on which people can sit without concern'. This is opposite to Alexander's (1977) view. This floor is not connected to the earth, but stands over and against it, establishing a barrier and therefore a new place that is 'clean'. The concept of 'clean' is particularly important. Literally it means that the dirt of the earth does not permeate this space, and to ensure this, shoes that have direct contact with the earth are not worn on board or tatami. Symbolically it suggests the space is purified of the invested meaning of earth by blanketing and blocking it out; it is a purity that erases the established bonds of the earth and distinguishes the interior floor from the social environment below.

The key difference between Stylites' floor and Isozaki's is not their geographical location, but the move from an individual's floor to that of a small social circle. The Japanese raised floor began as a privileged space: the earth was viewed as 'vulgar' or common, the elevated floor was 'sacred' and aristocratic (Isozaki 1986, 59). While this is rooted in relations of social power, we can also see this demarcation of the floor as creating a space

that allowed a small sub-set of society (an aristocracy) to define itself against the commons. It was a place of retreat where only they were entitled to stand, helping to define this group through their distancing from the common earth of the wider society.

Isozaki goes on to distinguish the traditional Japanese concept of floor from its Western counterpart, viewing them as operating in different modes:

Unlike the raised Japanese wooden floor, the upper stories that have been part of Western homes from early times are not a surface in a comparatively different phase. Although these upper-story rooms are far removed from the surface of the earth, shoes are worn in them; and chairs, tables, shelves, beds, and so on are essential because the floor is 'unclean'. (1986, 65)

He is suggesting that in Western architecture the floor was not as clear an invention as in Japan, and thus did not gather the same symbolic power. Further, Isozaki (1986, 61) writes that in China and the West it is not uncommon to have floors at the same level as earth, and thus the two become an uninterrupted continuation: their 'unclean' status means that the earth's influence is still present because they have not formed a clear disjunction. Even with higher stories, he implies that in these places height may not have the same connotations of retreat and removal as in Japan. As such, these spaces must be read as social interiors, which prompt the creation of a range of additional semiotic barriers that are used to cover and link people, such as objects and furnishings. This is the material culture of sociability, the things we dress ourselves in to construct our identity and project it to others, the things we use to clarify our social position.

Perhaps, though, we need not view the Japanese and Western floors as distinct, but as two aspects of a larger practice. Both are social spaces: the 'unclean' Western floor allows some part of the communal earth onto it; the Japanese floor is a heightening of social exclusivity. By slowly covering over the earth, each place is gradually detached from communal space. The result is the spectrum of gradations of surface that we commonly experience, each providing space for, and defining, increasingly smaller (though not necessarily mutually exclusive) groups of society distinct from the whole. The logical conclusion – the removed floor in its ideal state – may be represented by Stylites' pillar, or the lone person finally extricated from society.

The result breaks the simplistic binary of private and public. It also speaks of a different conception of society and the individual from that which is inherent in common discussions of walls, the public exterior and the private interior. As reflected in Benjamin's (2002, 220) notion of the soft and pliable interior as a manifestation of the person, there is a recurring notion that individuals reveal themselves in the private interior. This implies an understanding of the individual as pre-social, an independent fully formed spirit, and of society as the coming together of these individuals. While Simmel recognized the complex relationships between individual subjectivity and society, he did show preference for the notion that the person is defined before the group, and that the forming of society is a process whereby individuals make concessions and adapt themselves in public gathering (1949, 254; 1950, xxx–xxix). However, the concept of floors as surfaces successively removed from common earth paints the reverse of this picture, suggesting what Sawyer (2002, 244) has labelled as Durkheim's 'theory of emergence', a position that has also been adopted by many who followed in Durkheim's

tradition (see Halliday 1978, Halbwachs 1992). This theory looks to the causal power of society, arguing that the group shapes the individual (Sawyer 2002, 235). Through this, we understand the individual not as pre-social, but as emerging out of social relations and context. Out of the wider social organization – which defines roles, status and relationships – smaller groups organize themselves. And from these arise smaller groups again, leading to the construction of personality as a final point, which is created in reference to position in social structure. What this proposal of gradations of ground surface suggests is that differentiation in ground is used to facilitate the organizing of minor social structures, therefore symbolizing either belonging or exclusion. The space created by the ground plane reminds people of their position and what is therefore possible for them, establishing the spatial framework for the distribution of society and the construction of the individual person. It is a process that leads from the mythical primary earth, to the private interior floor. Personality is not something to be revealed in its natural state as one moves behind walls, it is something formed when given the space to separate from the mass through a process of removal, and thus defined through the barrier of the floor.

The Floor as Novel Invention

The floor helps to establish divisions in space, encouraging the re-orientation of smaller groups separate from the traditions of a wider society; but how exactly does the floor operate in this process? To see this we need to again return to the idea of the floor as a covering barrier. In some ways echoing Isozaki's notion of the 'clean' floor, Richard Sennett (1992, 60) wrote that 'up means neutral': the floor manifests as a return of the ground to a blank state, providing an opportunity to begin anew. The raised floor produces an anaesthetic to the effects of the earth, blocking its communal tradition and allowing the invention of new spaces in which groups can define new structures of occupation.

This idea is embedded in our architectural modernity, where the distancing of floor from earth was perhaps one of the key developments that allowed the utopian imagination of the modern movement to reinterpret space. It is particularly evident in the piloti that formed one of Le Corbusier's five principles (2007, 127). These columns were intended to raise the building off the ground, distinguishing the artificial floor from the earth it gently hovers above. When Corbusier proposed the idea of a new city in 1915 – the Pilotis-City – which like his later projects aimed to divorce itself from past conventions, he intended to raise its ground level several metres away from the earth. Practically, the plan is conceived to give access to amenities and show 'all those organs that up to now have been buried in the ground and inaccessible' (Le Corbusier 2007, 127). Symbolically, the piloti uproot the city, distancing its new environment from the enduring earth and allowing the radical transformation of the urban environment. On the smaller scale, in reference to the 1921 Citrohan design, Corbusier (2007, 267) refers to the rooms under the piloti as a 'raised basement' – that is, they are unearthed. And as with the Pilotis-City, this enables revolutionary thinking in the patterns of domestic occupation. No aspect of the new house or new city resides within 'stable' earth, symbolizing the potential to make space anew free of tradition, since, as Sennett (1992, 60) wrote, to go up 'means neutral'.

Sennett's (1992, 60) comment on neutrality was specifically directed toward the American high-rise, whose multiplicity of raised floors exaggerates separation and magnifies the possibilities for constant renewal. In 1909, *Life* magazine published a sectional illustration by A.B. Walker of a steel-framed building (Koolhaas 1994, 83). On each floor stood a different suburban mansion surrounded by trees and lawn, presenting a speculative combination of modern engineering and the values of the City Beautiful movement. Each story is a little piece of the suburbs, vertically stacked. The image gained notoriety in architectural theory through its inclusion in *Delirious New York*, where Rem Koolhaas (1994, 83) gave it a name: the '1909 Theorem'. The concept contained in this image – or perhaps it was the concept Koolhaas embedded in it – was pivotal in his examination of the interior of American skyscrapers in the 1920s and 1930s. It is also key to clarifying the representation of the floor as a barrier to earth.

Every floor in this project holds the capacity for an entire system of alternate versions of space, which through the high-rise can be simultaneously realized upon the same plot of earth.

On each floor, the Culture of Congestion will arrange new and exhilarating human activities in unprecedented combinations. Through Fantastic Technology it will be possible to reproduce all 'situations' – from the most natural to the most artificial – wherever and whenever desired. (Koolhaas 1994, 125)

Koolhaas's history of these American buildings describes a fantasy world within New York's hotels and commercial buildings, where every floor is a new beginning and every room's fantastical themes are completely divorced from its location. The idea finds perfect expression through the opening of the lift, where stepping out onto a new floor is to enter a different world. The floor's isolation from the staid tradition of the earth means that alternatives can be imagined, and novel invention is the key characteristic of this interior design. What Koolhaas described as the 'Culture of Congestion' is not just the increasing speed of the modern American city that he emphasized, it is the glut of ideas and places that reside upon and over each other at the same time. His 'fantastic technology' that reproduces these might as well be the symbol of the floor itself. Through the 1909 Theorem, floor is positioned as new ground, resulting not in repeated copies of the earth below but in ground swept clean of memory and tradition.

Importantly, the many rooms Koolhaas describes are not the domestic retreats of home that define interiors for their personal privacy. They are restricted public places of entertainment and social gathering. Their transformation of social codes makes them places for smaller groups to withdraw from the larger and define themselves outside of the continuation of traditional practices. These are the floors that Isozaki calls 'unclean', but which are essential for the construction of smaller social groups or sub-cultures, and the gradual production of personality in the individual. Any interior typology can be viewed as a space of sub-cultural identity, whether defined by club memberships, religion, working roles or family. In its departure from the earth, the floor allows for social modification through the provision of a kind of blank terrain on which to envision new forms of occupation.

Koolhaas's idea is only latent in the original 1909 drawing, but is given clarity in the pavilion that Dutch architects MVRDV designed in imitation of it. The Netherlands Pavilion at the Hanover World Expo 2000 presented a system of floors seemingly out of order. The logically most 'grounded' layer – the forest – is raised to the fourth floor, over the unrelated 'sand dunes' below. It produces a disconnection from what might be expected to reside in the earth and what, when considered from the earth below, should be on the higher artificial floors. When floors are stacked over floors they contain no sense of being closer or further from the earth. Since every one is blank ground, there is quite simply the floor itself and the new space that it has allowed to be created. MVRDV replicated Koolhaas's version of the original 1909 Theorem, but his characterization of the later 1920s New York skyscraper is arguably brought alive in the Hotel Silken Puerta America in Madrid. SGA Studio designed the building, that is, they put the floors in place. However, the project recognizes the interior's capacity for radical invention by leaving the design of different areas to different architects, who each imagine their own interior world (Hoteles Silken n.d.). Isozaki contributed, designing the 10th floor to echo the raised Japanese floor, 'clean', and where the occupant can be 'without concern' (1986, 65). This is a design that fully embraces the potentiality for fantastical variation that the symbol of the floor instils in spaces, because it removes the connection to earth and its implications of continuity.

If the meaning of earth can be summarized as tradition, then the meaning of floor is imagination. To raise up out of the earth opens the potential of modern interior design, and the floor embodies aspirations for change because it is no longer stable, and can thus be imagined as anything at all. Urban design responds to the symbolism of the earth, either through preservation or development based on the social patterns of use in public spaces; these either maintain the continuity of tradition or fabricate images of tradition (Boyer 1994, 309–10). When dealing with the social and the traces of the past, urban design keeps the long duration in sight, fostering the sense of permanency in the earth. The floor of the interior takes on its importance against this image of permanent social tradition. The work of the interior cuts away time. While the architecture and foundations of the shopping mall may remain, its interior is subject to wild and regular re-imagination that may leave no trace of earlier identities. The architectural house may endure but new tenants and their own accumulations of objects erase previous occupants. The space of the floor lies in flux, where changing definitions are tied to the malleable individuals created through socialization on the earth. To encode changing individuals, the physical form of a space must also change. Personalities are subject to change faster than societies, and thus time runs at different speeds between the earth and floor.

In Benjamin's (2002) view, the interior was soft, bearing the imprint of the individual and taking on traces. But perhaps this well-worn line is misleading. It is the earth that we invest with our memory, absorbing and retaining traces and therefore becoming bound to our concepts of historicity. The floor – that is, the invested symbol of the floor, which has the potential to shape our occupation of spaces – is subject to constant change, a blank slate that cannot retain beyond its life the fixed markings of social identity. The floor in this understanding is therefore most definitely a hard surface, an idea that wipes memory clean and allows imagination and change. This makes the interior floor unstable, a thing more open to experimentation and difference than the earth, since it can always be wiped back to its neutral state.

Conclusion

Earth and floor are two fundamental categories of ground plane, each with different effects on our conception of spaces, but they are not to be misinterpreted solely as real and tangible surfaces. In addition, they are ideas, or symbols, which we invest with social meanings that then return to us through specific instantiations of ground surface. They are abstract synechdochic devices, created to represent the qualities of more complex, real human spaces. That ground planes can become such primary symbols shows the spectrum of complex psychological resonances contained in the image of the ground beneath our feet.

In discourses of design and social space, the concept of earth has been laden with themes of social identity, belonging, exclusion and collective memory, all of which refer back to the mythical image of a first ground on which societies were formed. Earth is ground that retains the markings of time, where the bodies of ancestors are buried, and therefore a common element that binds a people to tradition. It is often treated as collective memory given material form. As smaller social groups define themselves, they do so through the demarcation of new grounds. The *Bürgersteig* or the Japanese wooden floor accepts only the few; the gutter and the earth take the rest. The symbol of the floor has been both rooted in the earth, and presented as a means for separation from it. In this dual nature, floor becomes a central device in allowing what can unfold upon it to re-imagine groups and spaces. It is connected to the social sphere, but creates a distinction; it is a destabilizing force that encourages radical transformation because it produces a new terrain wiped clean of old protocols. Floor is what Sennett (1992, 60) calls 'neutral', and what Isozaki (1986, 65) calls 'clean'. Nearly every society is shaped through the notion of earth, and the socialized individual develops through group interaction and 'habitus' in successions of semi-public and private spaces established in part through the barrier of floors, which allow for the recreation of our patterns of occupation. Not only does this suggest the significance of architectural form for the construction of individuals, it has liberating implications for interior design as an activity that uniquely takes place on floors. It suggests that interior design, as both a professional activity and a product of material culture, maintains this capacity for invention as its central project: to build again on unstable ground.

Returning one last time to the *Stories of Mr Keuner*, Brecht (2001, 37) tells us that when entering a new house, Mr K's only concern was to identify its exits. The reason, Mr K sardonically states, is that 'I am for justice; so it's good if the place in which I'm staying has more than one exit': in the interior he becomes particularly aware of his radical leanings and the threat this imposes. To Mr K, the public earth unknowingly confirmed his belonging, and the interior floor heightened a sense of change, inadvertently becoming a space for departure.

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