



A step up

Description

My office looks out to the original front entrance of the National Museum of Scotland. The restoration of the entry steps is now complete. The architects for the renovation of the museum provided an access-friendly entrance at street level. Once protected inside the basement of the building you ascend by



Flights of steps in public spaces are in the

company of plinths, podiums, and other means of communicating elevation, grandeur and importance.

Thinking no doubt of narrow domestic staircases linking cellars to living quarters and attics, the philosopher Gaston Bachelard denigrated the flatness of modernity: “Elevators do away with the heroism of stair climbing so that there is no longer any virtue in living up near the sky. *Home* has become mere horizontality” (27).

Setts in the city

Thereâ??s lots to say about stairs. For Sigmund Freud â??Steep inclines, ladders, and stairs, and going up or down them, are symbolic representations of the sexual actâ?• (234). He adds in a footnote, â??with rhythmical intervals and increasing breathlessness one reaches a height, and may then come down again in a few rapid jumps. Thus the rhythm of coitus is reproduced in climbing stairsâ?• (235).

I think he only meant this to be the case when you **dream** of stairs. Freudâ??s characterisation is now a cliché, but it speaks of anxiety rather than pleasure. For Freud, sex is never about pleasure pure and simple. Neither are steps.

Mood and immobility

Some of us are engaged in a project on mobility in outdoor spaces for older people. Now I think of steps as impediments. They are grand to look at, to sit on, treat yourself to a prospect, but not as a device for progressing through public space, especially where slopes, gradients and subtle contouring will do just as well for transitioning across levels.

Iâ??m also pursuing the theme of mood and mobility. Mobility is important in setting the mood. See post [Mood and movement \(and trams\)](#). But on the contrary for many people, steps speak of **immobility**. Hereâ??s a possible step mood list: aggravated, annoyed, anxious, exhausted, frustrated, giddy, listless, rushed, and stressed. Thatâ??s when going up. Reaching the top of a long flight of steps may afford elation, enthrallment, surprise, hope. Coming down: free, energetic, jubilant, refreshed, restored, depending on where the steps lead. In any case steps may contribute to shifts in atmosphere, and other threshold effects. See post [Betwixt and between](#).



ECA Beaux-Arts stair by John More Dick Peddie and George Washington Browne (1909)

Notes

- As every architect knows, stairs are made up of steps, and are internal. Itâ??s not usual to speak of external stairs, though there are exceptions (e.g. external fire escape stairs).
- Also see posts: [Heidegger on vertigo](#) and [Swinging](#).

References

- Bachelard, Gaston. 1964. *The Poetics of Space*. New York: Orion Press
- Freud, Sigmund. 1952. *On Dreams*. Trans. J. Strachey. London: Hogarth Press and the Institute of Psycho-analysis



Grand library staircase in the game Uru.



George Square running plinth. Architect Robert Matthew (1906–1975).

Category

1. Architecture

Tags

1. mobility
2. mood

Date Created

June 28, 2014

Author

rcoyne99

default watermark