

## Book Review: *Lifted: A Cultural History of the Elevator*

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### *Lifted: A Cultural History of the Elevator*

By Andreas Bernard

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Most of us ride an elevator on a weekly if not daily basis without much thought. The contemporary ordinariness of the elevator, however, obscures its epochal importance. In *Lifted: A Cultural History of the Elevator*, Andreas Bernard, editor of *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, Germany's largest daily newspaper, explores how the elevator shaped the twentieth century's built environment and how, as a piece of transportation technology, it reflected the anxieties of modernity. From its growth in popularity at the end of the nineteenth century to the Second World War, the elevator was an almost perfect manifestation of Charles Baudelaire's definition of modernity: "the ephemeral, the fugitive, the contingent" (p. 230).

Rooted mostly in a Foucauldian tradition of cultural analysis, Bernard's study demonstrates a deft reading of a wide variety of sources: from architectural plans to building codes to poetry, fiction, and film. Bernard places the elevator firmly at the center of modernity's built verticality. The elevator, according to Bernard, is the transportation technology that makes the skyscraper possible. Linked to the defining built environment of modernity, it is also a technology that moderns imbued with immense meaning.

Bernard begins *Lifted* with a story of fake news. At the 1854 Exhibition of the Industry of All Nations held in New York City, Elisha Otis demonstrated to a crowd of astonished onlookers his invention of the automatic safety pin. Otis dramatically exhibited his invention by cutting the cord to the elevated platform he was standing on. Instead of plummeting Otis to his death, the device worked and the modern elevator was born or so the founding tale perpetuated by Otis's eponymous company goes. This, however, was not the case. As Bernard demonstrates, the elevator has a long history dating back to the early modern period. Lift devices were employed, often with devastating consequences, in European coal and shaft mining through much of the nineteenth century. Moreover, in the late nineteenth century, Otis's competitor, Otis Tufts, was far more celebrated as the inventor of the modern elevator. By the start of the twentieth century, the Otis Elevator Company had successfully convinced the world that 1854 was the date of the elevator's birth even going so far as to create fake newspaper reports of Otis's demonstration for its 1978 celebration of the company's 125<sup>th</sup> anniversary. Despite this dubiousness, the 1854 Exhibition is important to the story that Bernard tells. Modernity needs a firm break from the past. The elevator's dramatic birth provides this break and made the elevator acceptable to suspicious urban dwellers.

Lifted is largely a comparative history of the United States and Bernard's native Germany. From the elevator's origin tale, Bernard illuminates how the elevator organized vertical space. Prior to the elevator, stairs moved people from floor to floor in an almost haphazard manner. With the elevator, people now took the most direct route from one floor to another. Before the elevator, multi-story space was often disorganized and chaotic. For instance, until 1846 there was no category for "floor" in Hamburg's residential statistics. Much like Georges-Eugène Haussmann's Paris, then, the elevator brought order to vertical chaos.

The new verticality enabled by the elevator created problems for the social structure of buildings. It re-codified the vertical class system of the nineteenth century in which the upper class and elite lived on the first floors, while the poor and the destitute lived on higher floors. In the elevator world, height came to mean prestige. In Europe the transition in the social meaning of verticality was drawn out well into the twentieth century. In the United States it occurred almost immediately with new hotels and apartments constructed around the elevator shaft. This transformation, however, was not necessarily inevitable. Bernard takes the reader through the nineteenth century's scientific and fictional literature on urban hygiene and disease. Presumably the heat and stuffiness on the upper floors that led to disease did not disappear with the elevator. According to the day's scientific literature, residing above the third floor caused abnormalities that passed on to future generations. For Bernard, the semi-public elevator overcame the biopolitics of verticality. With the installation of multiple elevator shafts, the elite could rise in comfort knowing that they would only encounter their social equals in the cramped space of the elevator.

The interior space of the enclosed elevator cab intensified the "problematic relationship between private and public space, intimacy and anonymity already evident in the stairwell" (p. 192). To help make clear this demarcation, early elevator cabs were made to look like a dwelling's interior. As elevators sped up and the time in them therefore decreased, the pretensions to domestic space fell away in favor of a more utilitarian room. Bernard, then, sees a transition in the social meaning of the elevator: as a space where one was assured to encounter one's social equals to a space that confirmed the anonymity of modern urban life. By the mid-twentieth century, the class and social politics of the elevator had essentially disappeared.

The final transformation of the elevator into a mundane technology of vertical life was the end of the elevator operator. As the class structure of the urban world became more opaque, so too did the very operation of the elevator. If previously the elevator required the expertise of an operator, by the middle of the twentieth century ordinary citizens with no training could operate a machine that had, only a few decades prior, been extraordinary. According to Bernard, the push-button crossed the threshold of activation and production. By pressing a button the user creates an action divorced from the movement of the touch. The button severs the proportion between cause and effect. A simple movement of the finger sends the elevator to dizzying heights. With the push-button the elevator had become benign.

Bernard has written an excellent cultural history of the elevator. He is adept with German sources and the vast majority of his examples are taken from that country. He is less successful in examining the elevator in the United States. For instance, after a long discussion of disease and crime in the

multi-story German tenement, there is only a brief mention of the American equivalents found in New York's Lower East Side or Chicago's Southside and no mention of Jacob Riis and other reformers. With such a strong focus on Germany and to a lesser extent the United States, one wishes Bernard expanded his analysis to include the United Kingdom and other nations grappling with the change wrought by the elevator. Lastly, while the standard theorists and figures of urbanity are here--Michel Foucault, Walter Benjamin, Georg Simmel, and Gaston Bachelard--the work of Henri Lefebvre is oddly missing. These are, however, small quibbles for what is an excellent work that will attract readers interested in urban space, modernity, technology, and cultural history.

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