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# Verticality

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Anthropological critiques of urban segregation tend to maintain a horizontal frame. Walls and gates keep undesirable people over there as opposed to here. Insightful as this approach has been, this article pairs everyday perspectives with the built form to assess the politics of vertical segregation in Guatemala City. With more than one hundred office towers and condominium complexes constructed in the last decade, Guatemala City presents a vivid and visually stunning example of how the rich lift themselves above the rest. This article argues that vertical segregation is yet one more strategy employed by elites to abandon public space. Guatemala City sprouted a skyline in little less than a decade. Although the city was low level for centuries, kept at one or two storeys by earthquakes, a recent surge in foreign investment has prompted the construction of more than one hundred new office towers and condominium complexes over the last ten years. Each is over ten storeys. Each is exclusive. Given that most capital cities across the Americas went vertical in the early twentieth century, Guatemala City's newfound height presents an opportunity to consider the 'verticality' of urban segregation.

The spatial dimensions of urban segregation are, of course, nothing new. Rising levels of crime and insecurity across the Americas have not only transformed the quality of urban life, but have also changed patterns of spatial organization (Caldeira 1999; Low 2003; O'Neill & Thomas 2011). The dominant scholarly observation, inspired by the work of David Harvey, has been that a citizen's 'right to the city' now depends on what side of a security wall that citizen occupies. Critical, poignant, powerful – this has been a timely but none the less supremely horizontal observation: 'As spaces are enclosed and turned inside', Teresa Caldeira writes, 'the outside space is left for those who cannot afford to go in' (1999: 130). Horizontal separation (inside versus outside) produces social exclusion (us versus them). This has been the insight.

Guatemala City provides a provocative example that confirms much of this conversation but in ways that encourage scholars to think vertically about urban segregation, yielding new cultural coordinates as well as the possibility of new kinds of critique. For one, verticality marks yet another strategy by which elites abandon public space; lifting themselves above the poor, the marginalized, and the violent, they engage themselves or

each other but not their fellow citizen below. In cities striated by verticality, it is simply impossible to sustain some of the modern city's more principled ideals of exchange and openness, of peaceful solidarity and collective responsibility. Verticality stratifies society one layer atop another.

Guatemala City's elite, to explain, have long lived *over there* as opposed to *here*. Segregation held (and still very much holds) a horizontal key: city versus country, uptown versus downtown, the right versus the wrong side of the tracks, and so on. The distance between rich and poor in Guatemala is more extreme than almost anywhere else in the world, but Guatemala City, with its population of just over 3 million people, does not have enough wealthy people to form what Caldeira (2000) has called a 'city of walls'. These are internally complete enclaves of privilege where the wealthy live in peaceful solidarity. Instead, Guatemala's elite 'disembed' themselves from the city (Rodgers 2004). They hop from exclusive shopping centre to private residences via bullet-proof cars. It has been a horizontal dance for decades, with tinted windows obscuring city life just enough to create an emotional distance between the rich and the rest.

But now the wealthy no longer live *over there*. Instead they live *up there* while the rest live *down there* – beneath the rich, at their feet. Verticality now lifts the wealthy above the city, the effects of which haunt the capital. In an era of unprecedented violence and political corruption, with a lucrative drug trade infusing Guatemala with billions of loose dollars, these new buildings stand as monuments not so much to modernity as to impunity. It is a predicament that certainly invokes Michel de Certeau's notion of walking the city (de Certeau 1984), but in ways that emphasize the built form as a politically charged kind of public culture. For verticality, whether known or novel, puts people in their place – be it in the boardroom or the *barranco*.<sup>1</sup> Verticality naturalizes superiority, reifying privilege with certain spatial properties (Harris 2011).

This photo essay, based on more than a decade of research in and on postwar Guatemala City, glimpses the visible distinction between high and low and considers how verticality constitutes wealth as a concrete, spatially encompassing reality. By pairing everyday perspectives with the built form, verticality becomes a mode of public culture that questions the cartographies of class. For while this photo essay is certainly about Guatemala City, it is also about a much more profound relationship between a way of seeing and a way of knowing that, together, license a way of being – one present in Guatemala City but also across the Americas. Consider the rapid construction of condominium towers in Toronto, Canada (Wintrob 2011), the emotionally arduous reconstruction of the World Trade Center in New York City (Dunlap 2010), and the halted construction (because of corruption) of high-rises in Bogotá, Colombia (Romero 2011). Each of these is a distinct manifestation of verticality, to be sure, but each also places the rich above the rest while planting the rest beneath the rich. For in Guatemala City, a new skyline indexes a new class of cosmopolitanism, one that floats above the city. As simple as it is significant, the experience of looking up at privilege, the experience of looking down on the masses, now defines Guatemala City. The question becomes, how will the rest come to read the rich?

Guatemala City has always been flat (Fig. 1). This flatness has a history. The short story begins with earthquakes, two of which levelled the former capital city in 1773, sending survivors packing for today's Guatemala City. They arrived in 1776. Construction began immediately, but a constant fear of earthquakes kept the city modest, sturdy, and



Figure 1. Zone 1. (All photos taken in 2011 by Benjamin Fogarty-Valenzuela.)

single-storeyed. The cathedral, for example, was completed slowly (finished in 1815) and without its planned towers. A century of urban growth followed. Fuelled by the reorientation of the national economy towards the cultivation of coffee, liberal dreams of Guatemala City becoming Central America's 'Little Paris' bubbled until they burst – thanks to even more earthquakes in 1917 and 1918. The same happened in 1976. Just as Guatemala City quadrupled in size, just as architects began to imagine a vertical city, an earthquake measuring 7.5 on the Richter scale rocked the nation.

The quake's epicentre lay to the west of Guatemala City, near Chimaltenango, but the entire nation felt the effects: 23,000 dead, 77,000 wounded, and 370,000 houses levelled. The seismic activity left over 1.2 million people homeless and destroyed 40 per cent of the nation's hospital infrastructure. Guatemala City, proportionally speaking, reflected much of the nation's damage. Of the city's population of 1.3 million people, the earthquake wounded 16,549 and killed 3,370, destroying 99,712 houses and rendering nearly a half million residents homeless. Water services were completely interrupted. The effect of all this was more than structural. 'I was 7 years old in 1976', recounted one man, as we discussed post-earthquake construction.

It was ugly. [The earthquake] sounded like a truck but like a truck that was totally out of control. All you could hear were things falling down. I was sleeping under a table with my little sister. And all we felt was this water dripping on us, this water from a pitcher that my mother had put on the table.

In the capital, people quickly left their homes, considering it safer to sleep in the streets (Olcese, Moreno & Ibarra 1977; Thomas 2006).

The 1976 earthquake also initiated a wave of migration from the rural interior to Guatemala City. Many moved to the capital for work and shelter. When they found little of either, they constructed shanty towns from whatever materials they could scavenge in whatever spaces were available. The net result was sprawl – without infrastructure,

without planning, without permits. Even today, approximately one-quarter of the city lives in what Guatemalan authorities define as ‘precarious settlements’ (INE 2004; Mérida 1977: 8). These are neighbourhoods ‘built with fragile materials such as cardboard, tin, or, in the best of cases, cement blocks’ (Murphy 2004: 64). These settlements tend to exist not just beyond the most basic of social services but also beneath the city itself – below eye level, at the bottom of *barrancos* (Fig. 2). It is here that moral assessments begin to pool. Reflecting on those who live at the bottom of *barrancos*, in light of those who live at the top of towers, a middle-class *capitalino* speculates, ‘Those people up there must think that those people down there are really at-risk, that they are risky. Those people who live down there must do bad things; they must be bad people. They are people who probably hurt other people’. Another added, in more direct terms: ‘Mientras más abajo, es más peligroso’ (‘The lower you go, the more dangerous it gets’).

Founded during land grabs amid the 1950s and 1960s, but expanding exponentially after the 1976 earthquake, *barranco* communities mushroomed. New arrivals from the highlands strapped corrugated metal to unfortified slabs of concrete. They built basic shelters on the outskirts of town, at the edge of cliffs, and at the bottom of canyons, with those living in *barrancos* having to walk upwards (literally up steep hills) to access the city (Fig. 3). ‘I mean, I need to climb up to the top just to use my cell phone’, explained one *barranco* resident. ‘I need to climb up to call the fire department. I need to climb all the way up to call the police – just to see if they will come down here’. These vertical challenges are exactly why, for decades, these communities have developed a dense



Figure 2. Puentes de Belice.



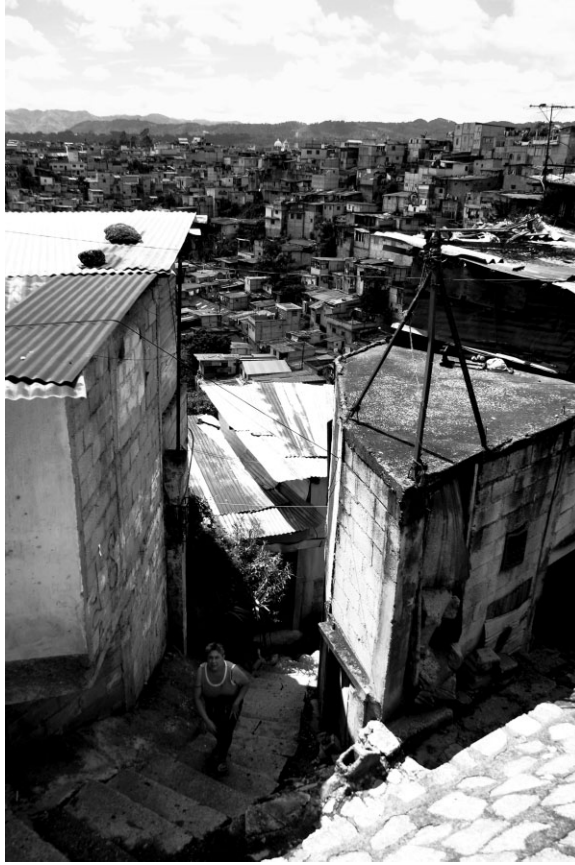


Figure 3. La Limonada.

vocabulary that revolves around the politics of verticality. Much of life takes place either *abajo* (below) or *arriba* (above). One's house might be *abajo* but one's work is *arriba*; someone's sister might live *abajo* but his or her daughter (finally) lives *arriba*. The police are *arriba* and would never dream of walking *abajo*. 'I live down there', explains another *barranco* resident,

but I work up there, in the city. Every day, I go up and down, up and down, up and down. I go up and down, down and up every day because there is no other way out. I mean, every morning I climb 375 steps. It takes me a half hour to get to the top.

Since at least 1976, however, this vertical vocabulary has only been privy to those who live off the grid, who live below eye level. 'There are two worlds [here in Guatemala]', explained one man. 'There is the world *abajo* and there is the world *arriba*. These are two very different worlds. And I live *abajo* ... I live like two blocks below, where the black water is'. These people are *abajo*, and they know it. They have always known it.

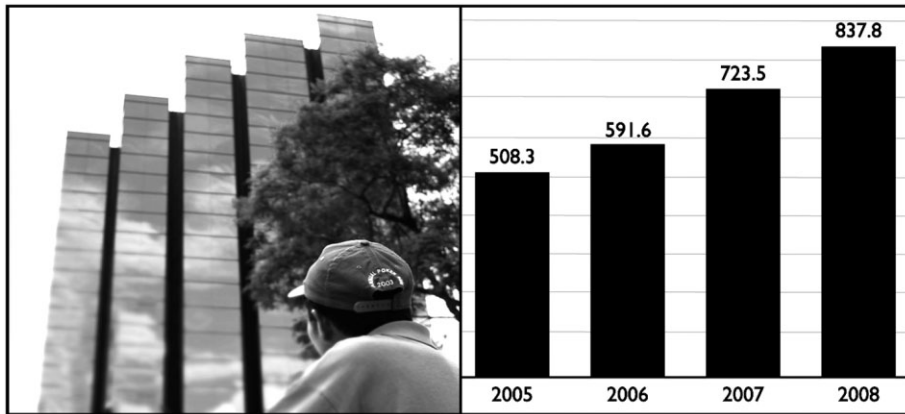
The rest of the city is just coming to the conclusion that they, too, live *abajo* thanks to new construction – for now almost everyone lives *abajo* while the rich live *arriba*.<sup>2</sup> This new orientation has to do with the vertical stretch of some recent construction.

The numbers are impressive. One hundred and six buildings over ten storeys have been built in the last ten years. Fifty-two of those buildings are over fifteen storeys, and eleven of those buildings are over twenty stories. Dozens more are under construction.<sup>3</sup> The names of these buildings also nudge the imagination skyward. There is Edificio Ver Alto and Edificio Miralto. Both translate to something like the Look Up Building. There is also Edificio Torre Marfil, or the Ivory Tower, and the Dubai Center (Fig. 4). The rest traffic in Continental fantasies of progress: Royal Palace, Atlantis, Topacio Azul, Edificio Bellini, Plaza Dorada, and Edificio Da Vinci.

The most optimistic people credit postwar prosperity. Guatemala, they remind the incredulous, has the largest economic market in Central America, accounting for close to 40 per cent of the region's total GDP. Guatemala also has the lowest volatility in GDP growth in Latin America, at least between 1990 and 2007, and this includes one of the lowest fiscal deficits in Latin America, the lowest external debt, and the best record of payments (KPMG 2009). It is an anxious kind of optimism that correlates the verticality of glossy spreadsheets with the verticality of the built form (Fig. 5). Guatemala City, as if on some march towards progress, projects itself and its people onwards and



Figure 4. Dubai Center.



**Figure 5.** Man and building. (Figure by Invest Guatemala, 2011, reproduced with permission. Units = direct foreign investment in Guatemala, millions of US dollars.)

upwards by way of the built form. And for those who live at street level or higher, the excitement of it all can be contagious. A middle-class office worker explains what even the unemployed tend to believe, 'The new construction is good. It's progress ... because in those buildings there's more work for the construction workers and for all the office workers, like secretaries. It's good for everyone who will use it'. Onwards and upwards.

Word on the street, however, is that these buildings have been built with blood. Eighty-four per cent of illegal cocaine that arrives in the United States passes through Central America, with nearly all of it touching down in Guatemala. Combined with the rapid expansion of transnational street gangs and organized crime, this uptick in drug trafficking has made this relatively small country one of the most violent places in the world (Demombynes 2011; Mathae 2011). In 2009, fewer civilians were killed in the war zone of Iraq than were shot, stabbed, or beaten to death in Guatemala. Some seventeen murders occur daily in this small country, with the average criminal trial lasting more than four years and with less than 2 per cent of homicides resulting in a conviction (Grann 2011; Wilson 2009). Today, impunity mixes with the swagger of organized crime to place a suspicious cloud over this new construction.

A less apprehensive analysis follows the demographics. In the late 1970s, as rural-to-urban migration thickened the capital city, the wealthy disinvested in Guatemala City's historic city centre: Zone 1. They headed a dozen kilometres south, planting plush estates in the orchards of Zone 10. Their respite lasted only a few short decades. When corporate work followed the corporate class from Zone 1 to Zone 10, urban congestion pushed the wealthy another dozen kilometres south to a nearby suburb serviced by a four-lane highway. *La Carretera al Salvador*, or the Road to Salvador, quickly became the privileged site for the privileged class. Yet, as more *capitalinos* 'escaped' the city, as a slowly emerging middle class built low-cost, low-quality housing developments south of the wealthy, commuters ultimately clogged the highway. Limited to four lanes by mountains and dramatic gorges, commutes extended indefinitely until the rich returned to the city. No longer comfortable with living afar, a particular class of people has come to live on high. Their decision, made possible by foreign investment, alters the visible contours of the city. A skyline quickly emerged. But to what effect?



One consequence is that this rapid construction created a sudden demand for unskilled labour while at the same time obfuscating labour's centrality to this rapid construction. Oftentimes from the rural interior, sharing studio apartments with upwards of six or eight people, indigenous men and women work from early in the morning to late at night, moving rock and laying cement. Others come from local rehabilitation centres, labouring through their addictions by framing doorways and snaking wire from floor to floor. Yet the buildings themselves, half-made but always stretching towards the sky, consistently direct one's attention upwards, to the very top of the building. This yawning optimism, pregnant with possibility, tends to mute the bodies upon which these towers have been built. To gaze upwards means missing what one finds on the ground. At the base of these towers, amid the commotion of bulldozers and cranes, makeshift memorials mark the death of itinerant labourers (Fig. 6), their lives ended by workplace accidents.

Upon the completion of these buildings, many of these men and women move from construction to maintenance. A newfound familiarity with verticality has provided the skills necessary to wash windows (Fig. 7). 'They put me on this small seat', explained one worker. 'I was hanging by a rope above the city. The wind, oh my God, the wind. It would blow me around. I wasn't too afraid because I got used to it. But it was tricky, with the bucket in one hand'. Some climb from balcony to balcony with hooked ladders, stretching themselves until their ladders latch onto the balcony above them. They scale these buildings one floor at a time. Others scrub bird shit off reflective window-panes. Dangling above the city by a rope, they occupy a symbolic role as individuals allowed to climb upwards alongside privilege but who none the less always remain on the outside of opportunity. It is a dangerous engagement with verticality that keeps the help at bay.



Figure 6. Pradera.



Figure 7. Window washer.

Another effect hits those on the high end, those with the means to live far above the rest. Their engagement with the city, by their own accounts, changes. They see the city anew. From the top floor, from rooftop patios, the grit of the capital city – its noise, its congestion, its violence – melts, especially at night, into abstract streams of reds, whites, and greens. The city looks and sounds different. It morphs, with the help of an elevator, from a troubled and troubling urban mass to a calming vista (Fig. 8). ‘Here, you don’t see gang members’, explains a high-rise resident, from the very top floor. ‘Here you see only elites. And from this perspective, it’s just so peaceful’. He moves to the edge of the rooftop.

You know, we’re actually at the top of the tallest building in Guatemala? And these apartments are the most exclusive in all the country? And just think how relaxing it is to just sit up here with a drink and just unwind. This is simply the most luxurious place in the entire city.

The man is right. Although outfitted with the same accoutrements found in any of Guatemala City’s palatial estates (a pool, a hammock, open bars), the most luxurious place in all of Guatemala City has become *arriba*: that is, places that sit above the city. This is where the rich have come to perch themselves. For, as one high-rise resident



Figure 8. Atrium.

explained, ‘Up here there is nearly everything. It’s really rare when one actually has to go down, when you have to go down to the city’.

Verticality’s ultimate effect, of course, is not yet known. Given how volatile public culture can be, how varied its interpretations can become, the rise of a skyline, the construction of new buildings, will be read in a number of different ways. To date, there seems to be a general optimism about verticality’s significance. These buildings, some insist, evidence a new Guatemala – one that looks upwards and onwards towards modernity and well past a not so distant civil war. These buildings, for many, stand as this city’s most visible signs of success. The question becomes, of course, what will happen to this interpretation in five or ten years, if or when the outer edges of this success fail to reach the masses – when, for example, the city’s cosmopolitan elite decide to stay *arriba* with their unfettered access to Bogotá and Miami. What will happen when their money never trickles *abajo*? What will be the interpretation of this new verticality when the *barrancos*, even in spite of this new construction, remain *barrancos* and when more *barrios* begin to look and feel like *barrancos*? Reading this growing distance (this literal distance) between the rich (Fig. 8) and the rest (Fig. 2), especially when pondered at the lip of a *barranco* (Fig. 9), either might mark two seemingly disconnected worlds or it might evidence a sense that these two worlds are actually hierarchically interconnected – that the rest live *abajo* because the rich live *arriba*. Only time will tell, but the volatility of verticality suggests that this new construction marks the beginning of a new vision (of a new experience) of Guatemala City. Hints of this new vision have already begun to emerge. From the edge of a *barranco*, looking up at the high-rises, one man prophesied through a millennial imagination, ‘It’s great that Guatemala moves forward, that it progresses, but at the final hour, when God comes to judge the world, those buildings will fall like dominoes. They will come down one on top of the other’. Onwards and upwards, it seems, but then where?



**Figure 9.** Lip of La Limonada.

#### NOTES

This article draws on site-specific fieldwork during the summers of 2011 and 2012, but relies on more than a decade of research in and on postwar Guatemala City. Fieldwork was supported by the Wenner-Gren Foundation (2006-7, 2010-12), the Harry Frank Guggenheim Foundation (2010-12), the Social Science Research Council (2011-13), the Open Society Foundation (2011-13), and the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada: Research Development Initiative (2010-12) and Standard Research Grant (2010-13).

<sup>1</sup> *Barranco* is the Spanish word for ravine.

<sup>2</sup> There are distinct histories of verticality, of course. In London, for example, top floors tended to be for servants and the urban poor (see Dennis 2008).

<sup>3</sup> No official numbers exist. The Guatemalan government does not keep a record of new construction projects in the city. The numbers here come from conversation with a small group of committed architects and enthusiasts who track the growth of Guatemala City's emerging skyline (<http://www.skyscrapercity.com/showthread.php?t=427181>, accessed 19 February 2013).

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## Verticalité

### Résumé

Les critiques anthropologiques de la ségrégation urbaine se limitent souvent à un cadre horizontal. Les murs et les portes gardent les indésirables « là-bas », par opposition à « ici ». Bien que cette approche soit intéressante, le présent article associe des considérations quotidiennes à la forme construite pour évaluer la politique de ségrégation verticale à Guatemala City. Avec une bonne centaine de tours de bureaux et de complexes d'habitation construits ces dix dernières années, la capitale du Guatemala est un exemple fort et visuellement frappant de la manière dont les riches s'élèvent au-dessus des autres. L'article fait valoir que la ségrégation verticale est une nouvelle stratégie des élites pour se retirer de l'espace public. Guatemala City s'est couverte de gratte-ciel en une petite dizaine d'années. Alors que pendant des siècles, ses constructions ne dépassaient pas un ou deux étages à cause des tremblements de terre, un afflux soudain d'investissements étrangers a fait surgir de terre plus de cent nouveaux immeubles de bureaux et d'habitat collectif pendant la dernière décennie. Chacun de ces bâtiments a plus de dix étages. Chacun est un ensemble « de prestige ». Sachant que la plupart des capitales des Amériques ont connu une croissance verticale au début du vingtième siècle, l'ascension de Guatemala City vers les hauteurs offre l'occasion d'étudier la « verticalité » de la ségrégation urbaine.

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