

Overworked | Overstressed

THE NATURE OF AMERICAN CULTURE

Contrary to the views of some researchers, the rise of work is not confined to a few, selective groups, but has affected the great majority of working Americans. Hours have risen for men as well as women, for those in the working class as well as professionals. They have grown for all marital statuses and income groups. The increase also spans a wide range of industries. Indeed, the shrinkage of leisure experienced by nearly all types of Americans has created a profound structural crisis of time.

- Juliet Schor, *The Overworked American* (1991)

It is the nature of American culture, "the land of opportunity", to work. People often overwork (and thus overstress) themselves as the demands of the workplace grow and leisure diminishes. It is all a product of the rising demands of industry, increasing productivity and American consumerism.

Juliet Schor defines the Productivity Dividend as the amount of time spent to produce a given value. Under this definition, productivity has doubled in the USA since 1948. As productivity increases the given work day could theoretically decrease, as the same amount of work could yield the same result in lesser time. Why, when the

option of a shorter work day (4 hours) or even work year (6 months) is present ¹, would employees continue to work full time? Is it the nature of American culture to get the most out of a given amount of time, the end product not being a goal but an optimized opportunity? Does this reflect the determination of American industries, greed, or even both?

As productivity levels rise and work hours increase, people are left with little time to distribute their income. Leisure activities have become more monetarily based and thus American consumerism is higher than ever, however time for leisure is at its lowest. This has led to high levels of stress among a large part of society ² and an

unfavorable cycle has commenced where Americans work longer hours in order to make more money, which is then spent on commodities, which they have little to no time to use or enjoy:

Capitalism had brought a dramatically increased standard of living, but at the cost of a much more demanding work life. We are eating more, but we burn up those calories at work. We have color televisions and compact disc players, but we need them to unwind after a stressful day at the office. We take vacations, but we work so hard throughout the year that they become indispensable to our sanity³.

The essence of American society has become such that people focus much of their time on external responsibilities and, in turn, internal wants and needs are put to the side.

THE WORKPLACE

Since the 1940's America has seen a slow but steady incline of average work hours. While the slight increase is not easily perceived over each year, it has become evident over the decades; there are approximately nine hours

added each year to the typical person's work schedule⁴. While this is only one additional work day it has added up substantially. It was predicted that, come the 1940's, while the rest of the world had arrived at a plateau there would instead be a slow decline in America's workforce demands; history has proven this to be quite the opposite: "U.S manufacturing employees currently work 320 more hours – the equivalent of over two months – than their counterparts in West Germany and France"⁵.

One of the greatest hardships of American industries is the inflexibility of work hours. Unlike many Eastern countries, a majority of businesses in the United States do not offer the choice of trading off income for shorter work hours⁶. Schor criticizes the "market for free time"⁷ and how this lack of freedom and workability has enabled people to feed into the aforementioned cycle where people are often unable to truly enjoy their assets or

even their own free time.

THE HOUSEHOLD

Aside from the work place, the household is the second greatest consumer of people's time. On average, 25 to 45 hours per week are dedicated to household chores⁸. In the past, even as technology advanced and chores were done easier, cleanliness simply rose since the same amount of time was allotted among the various tasks to be done. The advances in technology failed to save time two-fold, neither on those caring for the household nor those in the work force of manufacturing businesses⁹.

People in marriages and/or with families have obligations not only to the home itself, but the people they share it with. This consequently leads to higher levels of stress; with the time remaining for oneself after workplace and household responsibilities, one often feels obligated

to make up for their absence to those they live with. The time distribution for marriage, family, children, and friendships has led to a struggle with personal relationships.

THE FORGOTTEN INDIVIDUAL

Leisure is time, it is an activity, and it is a state of being. While it concerns people as a collective society, it is also greatly focused on the individual. In Michael Leitner's guide to improving the use of personal time, Leisure Enhancement, leisure is defined as "free or unobligated time during which one is not working or performing other life-sustaining functions"¹⁰. While most life responsibilities concern other people or external situations, one must put aside time for themselves. Hans Selye, a physician well known for his medical research on stress, places great importance on "enjoying life's pleasures, planning for future gratification, seeking satisfaction through social interaction, and pursuing optimal

self-expression”¹¹.

The range of activities that qualify as leisure is wide and debatable. Some may see household chores as a part of their leisure time, others as a further responsibility and extension of work. Some believe leisure excludes any time spent doing activities that are seen as unpleasant (e.g. watching a bad movie), as it is not seen as true leisure time when the individual did not enjoy themselves. In contrast, others believe that negative experiences qualify as leisure time because it was not a given responsibility but the individual's choice¹².

A troubling factor in modern day leisure is the role of revenue. It is common for people to lack energy to partake in leisure that is either social or physical, resorting to extravagant choices such as buying vacations and other assets for personal entertainment. Many people overlook the value in free activities such

as viewing art or visiting parks. These activities, referred to as “active leisure”, are effective ways to decompress from stress and can help reverse the “commodification of leisure”¹³. It is this social and physical nature of leisure that can revive relationships, develop community and still relieve the individual of everyday stress.

There is a necessity for retreat—for leisure and decompression away from the demands of modern society. So the question is: where can we turn to for escape from stress?

Stress | Escape

THE NEED FOR ESCAPE

Used properly and constructively, retreat is both a useful, and necessary, means for supporting self-evolution. If undertaken with intention, and not as foil for wallowing or self-pity, it can be a powerful tool for bringing us to our own next level, becoming more fully present in both ourselves and our lives.

-Michael J. Formica, *The Psychological and Spiritual Benefit of Interior Retreat*

In consequence of higher stress levels, escape has become a prominent part of American culture. It is a way not only to escape the clutter of one's mind, but to decompress and re-evaluate one's thoughts in order to more fully engage in the present and effectively move forward. While the end goal is given, the means by which we obtain resolve is quite variable. Escapist activities are strung throughout everyday schedules and range from watching television to substance abuse to hiking outdoors:

People retreat in different ways. We see it in children's play, in the "own little world" of the teenage girl, in the "cave" of the adolescent boy and it is a trait that many of us carry into adulthood. Rather than seeing it as "something wrong", whether in ourselves or another, we might be better served by recognizing that it is

part of a larger process of development, even in an adult ¹⁴.

The long term must be considered in order to most fully and effectively integrate such methods of retreat. People often approach escape as a way to fix the present; it is important for people to understand why and how the present directly affects the future ¹⁵.

We have built up our man-made world, a place which escapes from the insecurities and fears of nature's unknown and where people work together in a society to achieve one goal. We have fabricated environments and commodities which help us transcend the limits of reality and realize the visions of our furthestmost thinking. Some seek these activities to

avoid monotony, others to avoid problems. In the end "we can be sure of—good or bad—people's desire (or need) to find refuge from the pace and pressures of the everyday" ¹⁷. The boundary between business and leisure has become blurred as people seek diversions from both situations. Bored with the monotony of routine, escape can be used as a way to enrich life or provide a form of therapy: "social isolation in the form of retreat and social respite can be a time of healing, reassessment and regrouping" ¹⁸. On the contrary, escapism is highly regarded as a negative state where problems are avoided, and this deterrence creates even larger problems in the future:

We are a culture that thrives on escapism; just look at how much television we watch - and television, when you think about it, is really just about watching someone else make a living. If, however, this potentially escapist element that is built into retreat is undertaken with an underlying intention

that amplifies our interior process, we may then get somewhere. If not, then we are only avoiding or running away ¹⁹.

So how do people deal with the delicate balance between enjoying life or excusing ourselves from dealing with its necessary evils?

MENTAL ESCAPE

An act that is escapist in nature can be described as the following: any leisure activity which removes an individual from a current real-life situation in order to relieve stress. Daydreaming is a common past time which provides temporary relief. Yi-Fu Tuan states:

I can always resort to imagination, which is the most readily available means of transporting the self, momentarily, out of its body [...] And what is wrong with the unreal - with wild fantasy? Nothing, I would say, so long as it remains a passing mood, a temporary escape, a brief mental experiment with possibility ²⁰.

Watching television, listening to music, reading literature, and substance use, among other various hobbies, are all

forms of escape.

The quintessential form of mental retreat is that of complete transcendence, most commonly referring to spiritual and meditative states:

Any physical place, natural or artificial, can be altered for the better; people do it all the time. But what if the "place" one wishes to escape from is one's own body? [...] we do it often – imaginatively, as in day dreaming, or when we become wholly absorbed in some other person, object, or event ²¹.

Whether it be religion or nature, daydreaming or self reflection, the removal of the mind from the body and physical place is a common and varying method of dealing with common stresses.

PHYSICAL ESCAPE

Where real life stresses cannot be relieved by removal of the mind there is the need for escapist environments.

Whether this be the primitive sense of seeking protection from natural

disasters, the modern sense of stripping one's self from the industrialist city to minimalist nature, or the utopian sense of seeking a perfect condition, the desire for physical escape is omnipresent: "the circumstance one wishes to change – to escape from – can be social, political, or economic; it can be a run-down urban neighborhood or a ravaged countryside" ²².

As people can act as role models, or encouragers for self improvement, can the physical environment be a similar initiator? Do environments that relieve stress allow society to act more clearly, effectively and optimistically? Mark Weaver, principal and partner at Hnedak Bobo Group (HBG), states:

Hospitality design specifically strives to target the five senses to create an uplifting and soothing environment for decompression and escapism. My goal as a hospitality designer is to create design experiences that elicit passion, beauty and cultural identity through innovative design concepts that inspire the guest, stimulate the senses and engage emotion ²³.

Weaver's approach to design is similar to that of Michael Foucault's idea of the heterotopia:

... these spaces are where time and space remain suspended as if in a mirror. Here, we are outside the normal flow of events in a space that is real and yet unreal. [...] The heterotopia is not something that we would erect as a perfect place somewhere else or at some time in the future, but as a realizable alternative that exists in what we have already made if only we can find ways of unearthing it ²⁴.

The answer is not grand, and it is not a monument that one must seek out in order to find resolve. In *The Poetics of Space*, Gaston Bachelard observes that "we have moved from a constructed to a dreamed world; we have left fiction for poetry. But reality and dream now form a whole" ²⁵. It is a place to be unearthed within the fabric of the existing, the fusion of the realistic and the utopian.

Disconnection | Subterranean

FEARS AND PHOBIAS

...they have been the stuff of dreams and the reason for noses turned up in disgust. Yet when do we really notice the subterranean and what happens here? We are always paying attention to things terrestrial.

– Klaus Kemp, *Untervelten* (1993)

In the endeavor of seeking a utopian condition, societies have built up extravagant superficial environments ²⁶. Humans hide themselves away from greater unknown forces that cannot be controlled; what is left is a world where everything has been manipulated by man, the extents of every object known, manipulated, and documented. Tuan observes the meaning of human culture as “the ability to escape from or cover up a condition” ²⁷. We find comfort in the explainable and the controlled. explainable and the controlled.

In the past, the underground has been a place of natural formations that exceeded human notion. In the future, it became a place where things are hidden. Such places, characterized by

their unknown nature, are both intriguing and intimidating: “Carving a space out of nature, then, does not ensure stability and ease. To the contrary, it can make people feel more than ever vulnerable [...] By one means or another they seek control” ²⁸. It is this risk which makes the subterranean so disconcerting.

The nature of the subterranean constitutes many fears. The darkness, the moistness, the unknown — these are all conditions which man looks to transcend, not preserve. Klaus Kemp boldly states that bias overrules one's understanding of the underground; it is a place that is not known for spatial quality but is instead used for the dismal purposes we seek to avoid in our above ground existence:

Is man at the center of our concerns? A cynical question, when one sees what has been built for him underfoot: gloomy, shabby, shaft-like passageways whose ugliness provokes smashed lamps, smeary walls and excrement in its darkest corners. And in dents in the untended floor the rain gathers in menacing, gleaming puddles. Who has not taken a walk through similar, inhospitable depths, particularly after bright evenings in the theater, or after a concert or ball? Who has not moved down through narrow, cement-grey stairwells to underground car parks, those rough, hideously grey, badly-lit, labyrinth dungeons? It is not the shape or the architecture of such rooms that we recall but rather a surrogate: the number of the parking bay - insofar as we have already forgotten it ²⁹.

It remains a lost opportunity. These morose experiences and unsightly places, they help not only to define our understanding of such space but also to directly influence future approaches towards inhabiting it.

From the negative experiences arise not only fears, but also phobias. A phobia is defined as "a persistent, irrational fear of a specific object, activity or situation that leads to a compelling desire to avoid it" ³⁰. From agoraphobia (the fear

and public squares) to claustrophobia (the fear of small spaces) ³¹, spatial phobias and anxieties exist that people try to overcome:

In the basements, where the foundations of our most skyward-reaching ambitions rest on the land we attempt to deny, the reality becomes evident. We are afraid of these dark places. Their smell and damp seep into the gridded rooms above. [...] The higher we build, the more we sense our dislocation. A fear of heights increases as we spiral ever further away from the land ³².

In this passage, Aaron Betsky identifies a quandary. It describes the fear in depths of the earth for its discomforting characteristics, against which humanity seeks to escape by not going downwards but upwards. Societies respond by building taller structures though they become so physically removed from the terrestrial that it creates only disconnection. The origin of the fear that Betsky observes is not particular only to the spatial quality of the underground; this anxiety is elicited by the removal from common living conditions.

DISORIENTATION

The act of submerging below ground often evokes a feeling of detachment. One's perspective is skewed as the sun disappears and natural light becomes distant with depth. A sense of time can be easily lost, and there is no outer world to directly relate to. Bodily movement may be shifted. The transition from an erect to a slouched position has the ability to change mental condition and even create feelings of depression³³; in such a space, control can be taken from the user as the environment influences not only physical but mental behavior.

As previously observed, in face of the unknown, people feel discomfort as there is a loss of control. In the face of change, the disoriented individual may develop irrational anxieties:

One did not get lost, starve, die of thirst, wither away or freeze. Instead one was presented with wonder. Nowhere else do closed rooms evoke such different and ambivalent moods³⁴.

Kemp connects the ideas of starvation and death to feelings of uncertainty; while severe, one is made to understand the possibility of emotional range and transformation in the given situation. It is common for people to think the worst when they are uncertain of an outcome, in this case the unpredictability of an environment.

THE LOSS OF SOCIAL ETHOS

With depth and descent comes not only disorientation, but disconnection from society. Social norms leave one's mind more easily and a sense of liberation emanates. Bachelard speaks of the forest and the anonymity of distance and seclusion: "In the forest, I am my entire self. Everything is possible in my heart just as it is in the hiding places in ravines. Thickly wooded distance separates me from moral codes and cities"³⁵. It is here that he has complete freedom. The forest and the underground, while quite different, share this similar characteristic.

In history, the underground has been a place where alternative social structures and communities originate. While dislocated from society's approval, cult culture thrives:

The secret history of architecture is also one of communal spaces underground. From the earliest cults caves and the elaborate graves of pharaohs to the crypts in which early Christians hid from Roman authorities and to the fantastic realms Giovanni Battista Piranesi imagined, the underground has been a place where people came together to erect an alternative architecture and social structure³⁶.

If the underground acts as a place where people can escape social expectation, it can equally act as a place of personal escape from the stresses we associate with modern society. The need for a removed physical state relates strongly to the origins of subterranean living. There is an innate desire for escape and internment.

Origin | Subterranean

PRIMITIVE INSTINCT

Certainly, the cave as place of sensual retreat has a long history. Furthermore, aside from being associated with origins (the womb) and ends (burial), the cave has another use: the location where we come to terms with ourselves, our body and our society.

– Aaron Betsky, *Landscrapers*, 2002

Primitive fears lead people to seek forms of protection beyond their own means. The ways in which these environments are used vary, from the discrete nature of the timid to the spirited nature of the rebellious:

In many ways, this is the history of the repressed and the forgotten who have had to hide in caves or grottoes. [...] There they are invisible, building networks of minimal shelter that blend in with the ground, the trees and the bushes. Invisible people are not always rebels; more commonly people hide in the ground because they do not have the means to express themselves³⁷.

Betsky compares the nature of people who are avoiding outside society for the means of creating a new social structure with those who seek a place to make themselves hidden or anonymous because they are afraid of what they represent. People burrow themselves

away for reasons that are bold as well as cowardly; it is desirable to become less vulnerable to outside intrusion, surrounded on all sides by “walls that have the entire earth around them”³⁸.

While the primitive need for enclosure and protection is present, fears that have previously inhibited people from making best use of underground space still exist. It is modern society which has given us the means to overcome past conditions.

Bachelard states: “In our civilization, which has the same light everywhere, and puts electricity in its cellars, we no longer go to the cellar carrying a candle”³⁹. Above and below ground conditions have begun to reach equilibrium and this helps in alleviating primitive fears.

Those who seek to avoid conflict and

those who strive for leadership define the two common methods of concealment. Societies feel that the choices at hand are either to retreat into a protected place or to overpower with intimidation: "Drawing on an ancient tradition of hidden or secret architecture, theoreticians have long been proposing alternatives to the defensive structures and attitudes we associate with architecture" ⁴⁰.

Burrowing and hiding one's self is comparably effective to the imposing structures we build today. It is that which cannot be seen versus that which uses scale and physical appearance to intimidate possible threat. The former is far more resourceful. By looking back to nature we can more fully understand the tactics of protection. Societies have come to respond to the need for protection by building up great barriers; nature can realign our sense of the bare essential and how to work with what

exists rather than what can be created anew.

RETURN TO NATURE

As societies build up cities that replace the untouched landscape, primitive instinct maintains the desire to re-embrace nature. The act of submerging oneself in an underground environment can be traced back to this desire for nature's return:

They represent the beginnings of art (cave paintings) and they provide the refuge from which spirituality is born. It is as if, by going into the earth, we find the wisdom we then use to impose ourselves upon it ⁴¹.

In a world where people find pride in the structural heights that can be achieved and the buildings that can be built, the desire to return to the basics from which it all rose is instinctively maintained. There is a timeless simplification of living within nature, but it is also in this nature that one can easily get lost:

We do not have to be long in the woods to experience the always rather anxious impression of 'going deeper and deeper'

into a limitless world. Soon, if we do not know where we are going, we no longer know where we are ⁴².

Bachelard speaks of getting lost in the apparent infiniteness of an unfamiliar place; it is similar to the experience of driving to a place you have never been before. Getting there always seems to take longer as the mind anticipates the next turn, not knowing what to expect as the wait for arrival increases anxiety. Yet after finding that point and heading back, the familiarity of what has already been seen eases the mind.

This phenomenon is called psychophysics, or the study of ways in which time perception distorts ⁴³. David Eagleman, a world-renowned neuroscientist and author, observes the nature of the mental process when perceiving time:

The more detailed the memory, the longer the moment seems to last. This explains why we think that time speeds up when we grow older – why childhood summers seem to go on forever, while old

age slips by while we're dozing. The more familiar the world becomes, the less information your brain writes down, and the more quickly time seems to pass ⁴⁴.

Methods of intermediary mental activity extend one's sense of time and break free of monotony, particularly as one grows older. The mystery of the natural intrigues us. While we greatly fear the unknown, somehow we are drawn to it as our minds and imaginations revel in what we do not know.

MYTHOLOGY AND FANTASY

Society has created the fairytale of the underground, a feared place that often turns into a paradisaical or utopian society that has only been seen in dreams.

"Where else could one find reality and myth, banality and mystery, refuge and menace as close to each other as under the earth?" ⁴⁵ The descent to the subterranean is the gateway between this world of reality and that of fantasy.

If one is to search a term "subterranean"

on Dictionary.com's thesaurus, the site will provide an entry for the term and immediately following are the closest related terms. The first two results are as follows:

1. Main Entry: **subterranean**
[suhb-tuh-rey-nee-uh n]
Speech: adjective
Definition: hidden, underground
Synonyms: below ground, buried, covered, covert, hush-hush, on the QT, private, secret, subterrestrial, subversive, sunken, under wraps, underfoot
2. Main Entry: **infernal**
Speech: adjective
Definition: damned; underworld
Synonyms: accursed, blamed, blasted, chthonian, confounded, cursed, cussed, damnable, demonic, devilish, diabolical, execrable, fiendish, hellish, lower, malevolent, malicious, monstrous, nether, satanic, subterranean, sulphurous, wicked

This example exhibits the fine line between the mysterious and the obscene. Dictionary.com is "the most-visited, most trusted, online dictionary" and over 50 million people use the site on a regular basis ⁴⁶. Out of more than half a million

words, Dictionary.com saw "infernal" as the second closest result. While speaking of underground spaces, Betsky states that "they remind us of what we have buried, and so we associate them with the act of internment. In fiction, they are the places where what we thought we had left behind or conquered rises up again to take its often terrible revenge on us" ⁴⁷. The rise of the living dead, prisoner's dungeons, villain's hideouts and the gateway to Hell are only several of many adverse iconic scenarios connected to the underground.

So is it perhaps the danger that not only turns people away, but also draws them in? As new underground places rebuilt it is unclear exactly what can be anticipated: "At their best, the new caves express the tension between fear and generosity, between retreat and exploration of new terrain, and between closed form and open plane" ⁴⁸. This tension that Betsky speaks of defines the essence of physical

submergence, both in the natural and the man-made; restriction, compression, release - these are all experiences that the occupant anticipates however it is unclear as to when, how and to what degree:

The conception of the underworld as a place for moral cleansing and filtering, as well as all of its dark constructions, almost lets us forget that pleasure has been sought inside of the earth and has been accorded its place here ⁴⁹.

It is here that not only physical protection is found, but also mental disconnection; in the words of Bachelard, "when it comes to excavated ground, dreams have no limit" ⁵⁰. It is in the subterranean where one can disconnect oneself from the rational conditions of normal life; it is underground where one can truly escape.

Escape | Subterranean

ARCHITECTURAL PRECEDENT

The only way to permanently break the cycle of escapism is to create a positive perception of reality.

– Erin Falconer, *Overcoming Addiction and Escapism*, 2012

Designers and visionaries are able to change the predispositions of those who would normally turn away. Ernst von Meijenfeldt writes, “It is a clever designer who tackles such general problems with negative associations at their roots”⁵⁰. The following case studies exemplify how innovative people have addressed and redefined the idea of subterranean living.

Giovanni Battista Piranesi’s *Carceri d’Invenzione*

Etched images of Underground Prisons
Rome, Italy
1745

Giovanni Piranesi based much of his work on architectural mysticism; he envisioned places that exceeded human realities. Within Piranesi’s etched portraits of the *Carceri d’Invenzione*, or

the “Imaginary Prison”, an underground towering labyrinth of staircases and machinery is displayed. Passages spiral upwards but terminate without landing, leading to nowhere. The place is unreal yet familiar. Each image is drawn from the occupant’s point of view and is always looking upward towards the towering world of extravagant contraptions and ambitious paths. The image is strewn with ominous, shadowy figures. It is clear that his purpose was not to construct these visions into a reality but to exercise the world’s ability to envision what does not exist. As the world was seeking to build upwards, expanding cities and taking away uncultivated land, Piranesi sought to question the possibilities of a place below the earth⁵¹.

Peter Zumthor's *Thermal Baths*

Vals, Switzerland
1996

Reminiscent of historic caves, the spa is located among the Swiss Alps beneath a grassy hill and is enclosed by walls that are constructed out of locally quarried granite. The land, stone and water embody the depths of the mountainous landscape: "after this immersion in another world... this journey has brought guests back into reality, cleansed and with heightened senses" ⁵². One is surrounded by the imagery of a place dug out of Alpine rock. Zumthor takes complete control over the visual and auditory experience of the occupant; the submerged space only refers to the above ground in brief moments. He creates a place that, while still reminiscent of the outside environment, allows the user to disconnect and decompress away from reality of the outer world.

Users often resort to the quickest and

easiest method of getting from one place to another. Meijenfeldt discusses the idea of treating circulation "like the flows of liquid and gasses" ⁵³, placing intermediary visual and physical stimuli which allow the user to slow down and contemplate the space. The rate at which people circulate through a space is determined by the variation of experience (similar to the theory of psychophysics, discussed in the previous chapter Origin | Subterranean). Zumthor uses 'negative space' to provide options for circulation: "moving around this space means making discoveries. You are walking as if in the woods. Everyone there is looking for a path of their own" ⁵⁴. Similar to Bachelard's explanation of the forest, the idea of the unknown and discovery is used in Zumthor's Thermal Baths as a way to allow the user to become completely immersed in a distant environment.

Zumthor also emphasizes contrast in

space: high versus low, open versus closed, isolation versus congestion, natural versus man-made. The nature of going underground often suggests congestion when moving from an open to a closed space; through varying experience, this feeling is relieved. Zumthor strongly regarded the role of the human body in space: "The stone rooms were designed not to compete with the body, but to flatter the human form (young or old) and give it space...room in which to be" ⁵⁵.

Lebbeus Woods' *Underground Berlin*

Berlin, Germany
2009

Woods' *Underground Berlin* explores the vision of an underground world that exists just below the bustle of a large city. It is an architect-meets-scientist story where two individuals journey to find a secret laboratory beneath the earth. It is a long abandoned place where people once studied such forces of the earth, and which defies the

height of terrestrial existence.

Woods composed a series of drawings of limitless tunnels and machinery, a modern day interpretation of Piranesi's *Carceri*. It is a world where people have built structures based on the earth's motions and depths; they are unified with the earth. Woods states: "the better to come into harmony with, then gain mastery over the earth's great forces" ⁵⁶. It is a response to modern society. We pride ourselves on what we physically have gained. We have lost sight of the beauty in this harmony.

Dan Barasch and James Ramsey's
Low Line

New York City, USA
Present

Dan Barasch and James Ramsey, designers of the Lowline, envision an abandoned subway terminal under New York City's Delancey Street as a public park that evades the hectic conditions of the city.

The two co-founders have developed a technology that captures light above ground and transmits it below, a system of fiber optics carrying enough light into the space to allow the life and growth of natural plants. The project will be the first underground park in New York City and it is redefining the meaning of the outdoor experience. It is not only invigorating an existing unused place; it is providing a way of changing the nature of underground space completely.

The project is only in its beginning stages however it has been published by various well known news sources such as The New Yorker, New York Magazine, ArchDaily, and the Huffington Post among others. It currently has reached just over \$150,000 in funding on Kickstarter (a public website where people can donate to up-and-coming designers) alone ⁵⁷.

ARCHITECTURE AND DECOMPRESSION

An infinite number of buildings are erected dedicated to escapist activities: the visual and performing arts, libraries, and spiritual gathering places among many others. These environments provide a means of retreat when it is most needed, and the underground is a base for the most fantastic of solutions:

A grotto, a craggy rock or dark ravines should be either built, found or carved out of rugged boulders in such a way ... that they bring such great delight to the observer, that he completely forgets himself and where he is ... He will not soon derive such pleasure from other things ⁵⁸.

Subterranean architecture can not only resolve primitive fears of the underground but also provide a means of physical escape for those who desire a retreat from the stresses of everyday life. The act of descent is where the dream-like state of mind originates, the mind and body leaving the world of the terrestrial. Bachelard states, "We always go down the one that leads to the cellar, and it is

going down that we remember, that characterizes its oneirism" ⁵⁹. Hence the act of submerging and emerging is a critical experience during the journey. How one is disconnected from one environment and introduced to another defines the occupant's mental state of being while in the space.

Underground space is internally driven. It is unaffected by circumstance, disregarding expectation and approval. It is driven only by the inhabitant and the function that serves the occupant:

The designed interior, which forms an artificial world within the walls of architecture, often evokes the land through its imagery and forms. [...] We make our buildings to create interiors, and then deny this achievement, hiding it with facades and abstracting it into concerns about function ⁶⁰.

Betsky is skeptical of the connection between the inside and outside of buildings. It is often a relationship hindered by external factors unrelated to true functionality. When an individual

seeks escape, the focus is on the internal being rather than a façade. An architecture which focuses on its interior without the contingencies of the exterior is a sublime situation for an escapist environment. Outside conditions are eliminated and the user has become the sole focus.

As the sole focus, the user is given an opportunity for control. The fear of the underground is largely based on unknowns. The greater the opportunity for decision making, the more in-control the occupant feels and the greater the stress relief:

Architects seem unwilling to take us all the way back into its recesses. We need light, air, and a connection to the outside world of reason ... Architects do not want to isolate us unless they can excuse their acts by designing buildings that demand spiritual commitment. Only non-architects allow us a hedonistic enjoyment without reference to the outside world ⁶¹.

Why is it that Betsky defines this disconnected experience as

"hedonistic"? It is the nature of humans to at times be completely self indulgent, where one does not care about the outside world but only what effects him or her in that very moment:

On a larger scale, we retire into dark caves to fantasize collectively [...] in these ways we erect faux caves that remove us from the rational structures of our everyday lives – edges blur, perspective disappears, we find ourselves staring at ourselves and the world we have made. [...] The cave is a transformative space where we can reject the worries of the modern world and focus on a direct contemplation of ourselves and our place in relation to something immense and abstract ⁶².

Many buildings in modern society are based on access to natural light and exterior views among many other externally driven factors; as a society, it is essential to provide a place where one can turn away from everything and concentrate only on one's physical and mental state of self.

ESCAPE

The use of underground space as a place for escape is not expected, however it is a compelling answer. Society's evolution has brought the increased desire for height, views, lightness, and transparency; society moves away from the dark, heavy and hidden nature of the cave. Consequently, the advantages and opportunities of building underground has become a discredited but promising spatial opportunity. As cities expand and structures reach higher, land area diminishes and we are left asking ourselves: Where do we go next? This is an issue of the present which must be addressed and overcome.

The goal is to create an environment which provides multiple means of escape for the individual needs of a dense and varied urban populace. The program is that of path and place; it is a space where one is able to take a moment away from everyday stresses to

decompress, reflect, and move forward. It is necessary that the project be directly connected and/or adjacent to a dense urban community, however the interior spaces should remain dislocated from that community. The client base is indefinite. Whether it be the working professional or the unemployed, the stay at home mother or the university student, the sick or the struggling, the target client is any individual who seeks escape from everyday stresses.

My proposal is the adaptive reuse of the abandoned Tremont Subway Tunnel in Boston, Massachusetts. The site is located in the heart of the Theater District, an area congested with office buildings, educational institutions and commercial industries. The abandoned tunnel offers a place of solitude away from the cacophony of street life and will house a series of meditation spaces for both individual and collective use; a journey of path and place, the

experience will provide the user temporary, and necessary, escape from the realities and stresses of modern society.

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