

Empty Aisles

A Pleading



The nondescript aisle has long been regarded by architects and planners as the poorer cousin of boulevards, squares and streets. In this thought-provoking piece, **Peter Benz** defends this often overlooked transition space and reminds us of its everyday beauty.

“What is vertigo? Fear of falling? No, vertigo is something other than fear of falling. It is the voice of the emptiness below us which tempts and lures us, it is the desire to fall, against which, terrified, we defend ourselves.”

*Milan Kundera,
The Unbearable Lightness of Being*

Towards the end of the 1958 thriller *Vertigo*, the main character John “Scottie” Ferguson, who suffers from extreme fear of heights chases a suspect up a bell-tower, when he involuntarily looks down the stairwell and experiences a flash of vertigo: the central-perspective, strictly geometrical space below him seems to expand and contract at the same time, effectively wiping out any sense of spatial stability and pulling him in.

This stunning visual effect, which *Vertigo's* director Alfred Hitchcock did not invent, but was first to use this prominently in a star-studded movie, came to be known as "vertigo zoom" or more correctly as "dolly zoom". It is achieved by continuously adjusting the zoom lens while the camera moves – in this case – away from the subject of the image. Doing so, the subject will keep the same size throughout the effect, while the spatial perspective of the surrounding setting shifts substantially.

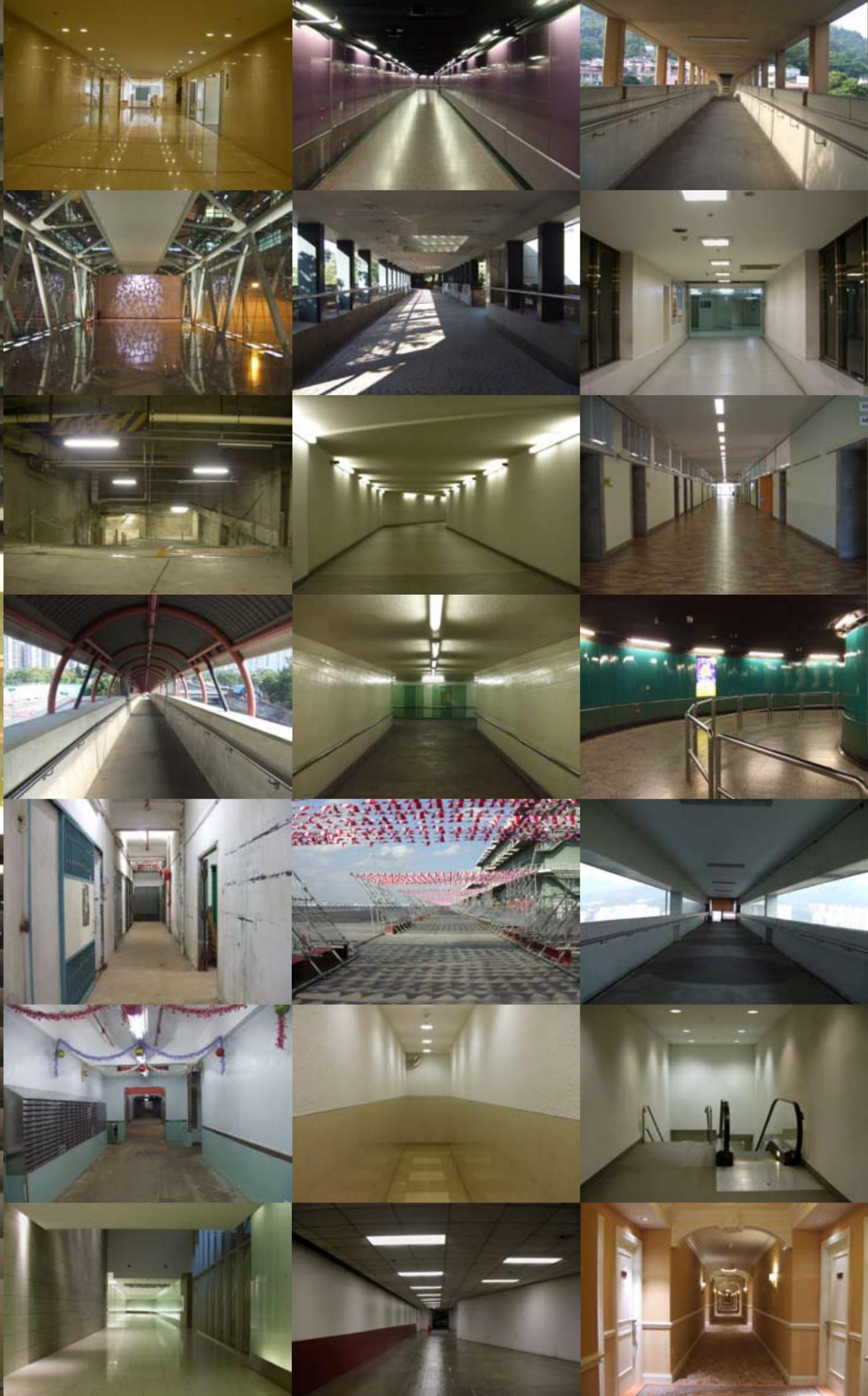
Interestingly, despite the dolly zoom in *Vertigo* supposedly showing a vertical, and – for this very reason – a dangerous space (at least for Scottie), the scene was actually shot in a horizontal set: the whole stairwell was tilted onto its side and the camera mounted on a rail-system into the centre of the space. Thus we actually see – and fear – an aisle.

There are few spaces as archetypal as aisles: by definition they have to be long stretching, and compared to their length relatively narrow and usually low. Most aisles are straight, occasionally with a bend, but almost always some opposing end – that actually may not be the end, but just the start of another aisle – is visible. It may have several entrances/exits throughout its length, but it is defined in its dimension by the entrance and the exit at its opposing ends. You see an aisle, you know an aisle.

Despite – or because of – these very primary characteristics of any aisle, it does develop a very strong behavioural reflex on anyone who enters it: the aisle will lure you in, drive you restlessly along its length, and only release you at its end. No way to stop and have second thoughts. Have you ever wondered why all those movie heroes always go down the dark, scary passageway, despite knowing right away that no good lies at its end? It's the magic of the aisle.

Much has been said and written about "non-places" as defined by French anthropologist Marc Augé in his famous essay *Non-Places: Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity* (1995). According to him "non-places" are "places of transience that do not hold enough significance to be regarded as 'places'." By this definition an aisle, especially an aisle in a public context, easily qualifies as a "non-place" as it usually merely functions as a connector of other places, or – very often – other even larger non-places like station platforms, airport gates, subway concourses or pedestrian flyovers: no further significance at all.





Obviously the term “non-place” intuitively evokes some negative connotations, as it seems to define a place by something it is not, thus assuming something is lacking. Thinking of all the design possibilities available to the skilled architect or interior designer, and then looking at the bleak reality of aisles, one has to conclude that very often this assumption is somewhat correct. Judging from the often quite bare lighting, some occasional signage and – if any – revolving advertisement billboards, aisles don’t seem to be the focus of any design efforts by anyone. And rightly so: as aisles are usually considered mere service-spaces, which people are not intended to spend much time in, any attempt to enhance their appearance would actually be contradictory to their purpose.

However, if an aisle, by its very nature a space for transition of people, is devoid of people – thus in a way is not only deserted, but even deprived of its meaning – it can finally reveal its immanent architectural power:

the strict geometry with its extreme, yet elegant proportions;

its symmetric layout, only interrupted and emphasized by small, often accidental insertions like fire-extinguishers or ash-trays;

its shiny, easy-to-clean surfaces that reflect the space onto itself;

the repetitive rhythm of a handful of random features, like doors or billboards, that amongst each other add time to the lure forward; its timeless, contemplative stillness that contradicts starkly the bustling activity of the aisle’s common function...

Aisles may be non-places, but they certainly are great spaces. And occasionally we should let ourselves fall into one. ■