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Author

Batar, Attila A.

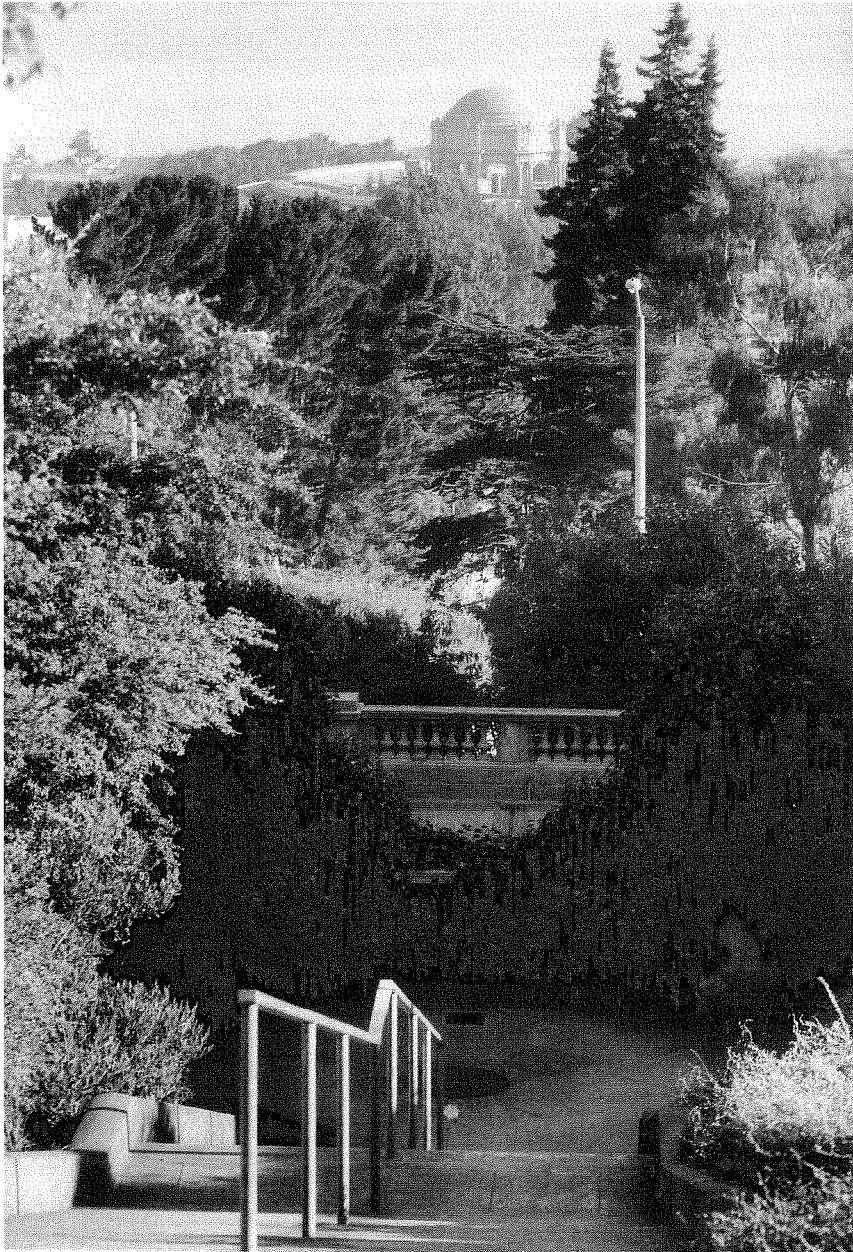
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Learning from a Stair: The Lyon Stair of San Francisco

Attila A. Batar



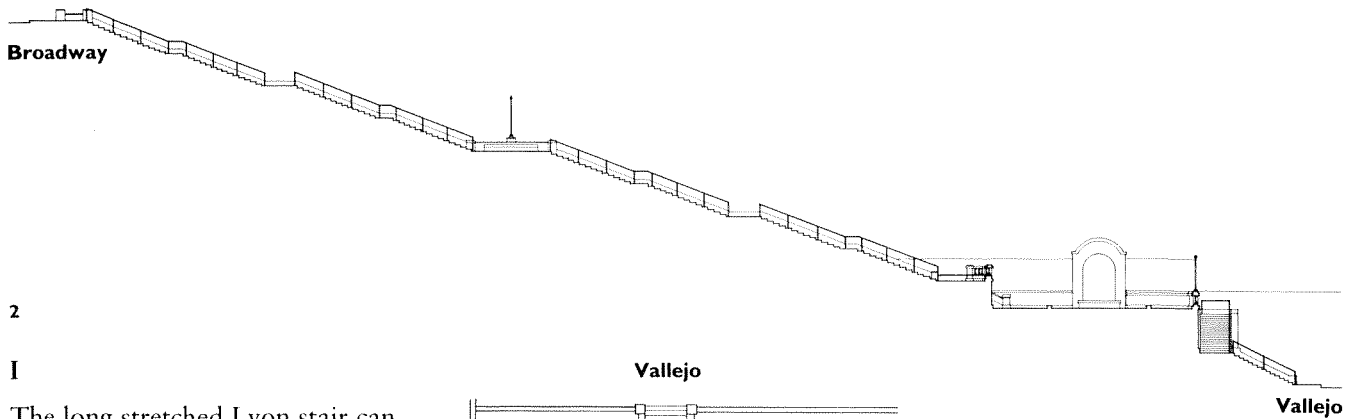
In San Francisco, where straight streets cut abruptly across the hills, the most arduous slopes demand sidewalk stairs. They are all exceptionally long and steep, and most are monotonous and unpretentious sidewalk steps.

At the northern slope of Pacific Heights, still in the middle of San Francisco, where the city's wealthiest neighborhood suddenly terminates and the forest of the Presidio begins, there is a borderline, part of which is Lyon Street. The mansions and the woods face each other on opposite sides, while the street is formed with steps that run from Green Street up to Broadway, a distance of two city blocks.

The Lyon stair is not a proper sidewalk stair, since there is no walkway on the side. Here the stair lies in the middle of the street, which is, for the most part closed to vehicle traffic.

The Lyon stair opens a view corridor especially for the people who are looking down from the top. This visually extended axis leads the eye to the Marina, then to the bay, and finally to the surrounding mountains and the cloudy sky above. At dusk the sun sets behind the viewer, but its rays settle on the bald, gold dome of the Palace of Fine Arts, which becomes its substitute in the middle of the view. Around this radiant focal point the scenery is well organized. It is a perfect vista.

- 1 View north from top of Lyon Stair
- 2 Section of Lyon Stair, upper portion
- 3 Plan of Lyon Stair, upper portion

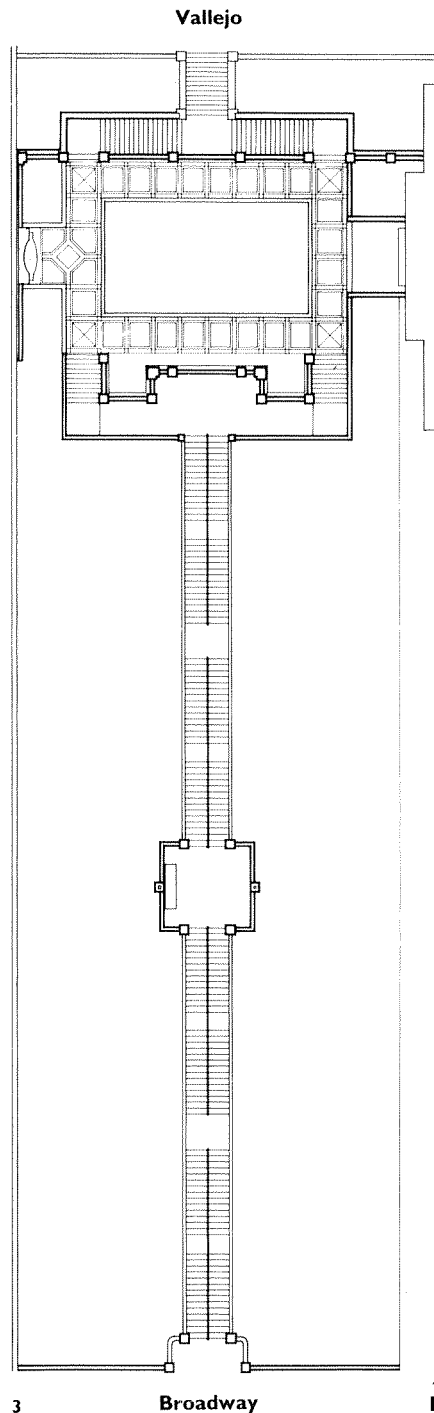


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I

The long stretched Lyon stair can be divided into three sections: the lower, the upper, and the uppermost portions. At the bottom, between Green and Vallejo streets, there lies on a gently sloping area an upside down U-shaped cul-de-sac enclosing a tree island. At the top of the U, where a long, narrow, unthinkably steep stair appears, the cars have to turn back. From here on, it is for pedestrians only. The stairway bursts to the crest at a 60 percent slope, and the effect is astonishing.

Approaching from below, this entire area appears to belong to the forest. Gigantic trees tower above streets and mansions as they grow out from the aisle, from the neighboring lots, and from the nearby forest. They leave everything below them in darkness. The milieu is somber and wildly romantic; it is saturated with the enigmatic mystery of the surrounding forest. The unbroken, narrow, straight flight of stairs, with its 126 concrete steps, lies in this exuberant, woody environment, exactly in the middle of the street. From here up it is no longer a real street; the steep slope's entire width between mansions and forest, with the exception of the stairway itself, is covered by tree trunks and undergrowth. From this wilderness springs forth the dramatic flight of stairs.



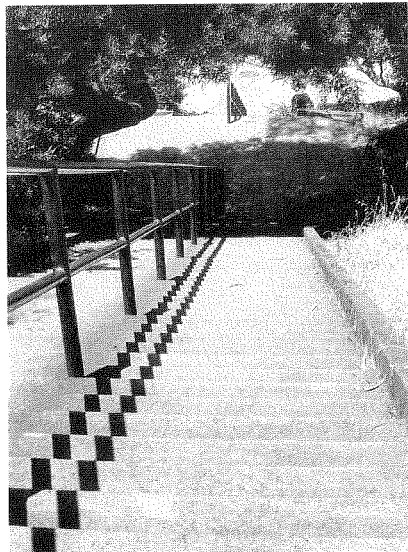
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Broadway

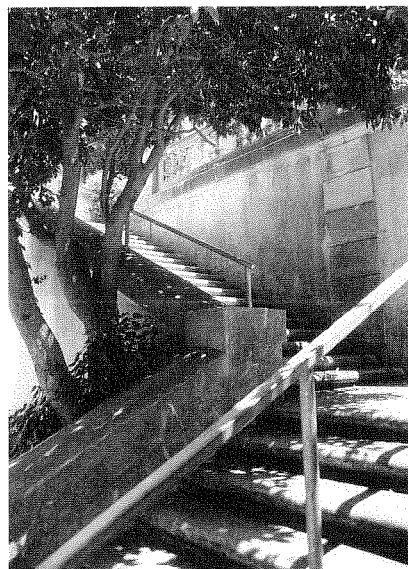




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II

Where the upper portion of the Lyon stair begins at Vallejo Street, a transformed world welcomes the arriving climber. The umbrageous atmosphere gives way to the organized, concrete, and rational. Facing the viewer is a buttressed concrete retaining wall, enriched with balustrades, cornices, and imitation ashlar. This tour de force, flanked with mansions and forest trees, creates a calm, dignified, and elegant effect. It holds back the hill behind and above, where, in a similar way to the lower section of the Lyon stair, plants and bushes, but not trees, cover the site. The street has disappeared. There is no place for cars. There is only the infinite stair in the middle coming into sight. This part of the stair breathes more freely than that below; the green surrounds but does not bury it.

The buttressed wall has a cut in the middle with the entering stair cascading down through it. Each side is guarded by a tree. Further up at the first landing, where the stair divides into two, is an inscription on the facing wall, chiseled in with roman type: LYON STREET. The walls are crowned with balustrades and behind, before the ascenders's eyes, emerges the mansion's main facade. Then there is a surprise: the passerby arrives in a formal garden, in a small palace court or terrace, a solemn ceremonial place, lifted above Vallejo Street. People absorbing the new milieu first see the new architectural expressions: the balustrades, the cornices, the paving patterns, the Renaissance orna-

mentations and elements; then they sense its new atmosphere: the colorfulness and gaiety, yet the formal exclusive and elevated solemnity of the place. It is a drastic change, which shocks and easily creates confusion. One started to walk on a street but has arrived in what looks like a private garden. Is it a public street or a mansion's court? Is it public domain or private property? Do we have the right to be here, or are we violating someone's privacy?

There is a break in function as the stair moves to the terrace. Instead of a landing, the terrace seems to be an extension of the mansion; the extended building axis organizes this outdoor space. The longer flanks (walls and balustrades) run parallel to the axis, leading the space toward the niche, a gentle concluding motif at the opposite end. The entire setting has been designed for the viewer looking out from the building. The terrace garden is intended to be a palace court, not a magnified landing.

This formal terrace garden is encompassed by geometrical structures on all sides. To the left is the mansion's main facade. On the opposite side an arched concrete fence with a niche in the middle (one must imagine the missing statue) separates the court from the wilderness behind. Facing the viewer is the upper buttressed retaining wall enriched with imitation ashlar and balustrades and softened by overgrown ivy and bushes. Two additional stairs occur at each end; they mirror the position of the arrival stairs. Behind the



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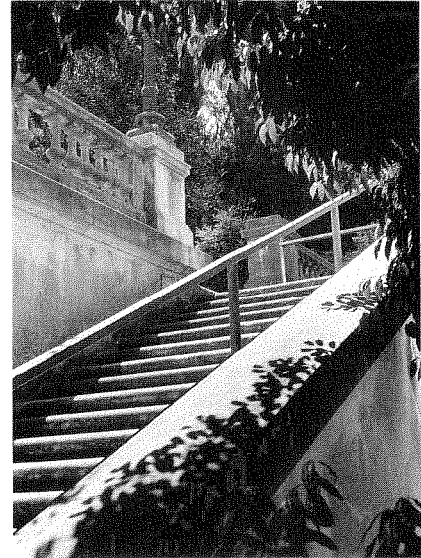
balustrade, the two upper stairs are united again, and a single stair approaches the top. Adjacent to the garden and beyond, the forest solemnly watches over the terrace.

This terrace garden has an open side to the north, from whence we arrived. Between the forest and the mansion, above the parapet, the unique San Francisco panorama rises to view. This panorama reinforces the festive quality of the terrace, which remains gentle because the overgrown balustrade and all the ornaments reduce its size to a human scale. However, the relatively small terrace garden still does not disappear in this grandiose environment. In these dark-toned surroundings, its dimensions seem to expand as the sun lights the open spot. The splendid, bright terrace garden is able to compete with the large dark forest. The terrace also gains significance from its elevated position: from here the buildings and the forest trees look relatively diminished, and the trees in the remote distance are foreshortened. Terrace, balustrades, forest—widening concentric rings—all add “dimensions” to the garden, which becomes the focal point of this impressive environment.

It is surprising to find a Renaissance terrace garden in the middle of a San Francisco street, but once we are here, one could easily imagine seeing people blithely waltzing out of the mansion. All kinds of romantic images come to mind, but nothing happens. Nobody leaves the house, nobody sits down at the niche to rest, nobody bends over the balustrade to enjoy the view.

One day, while walking down the Lyon stairway, I met an elderly man who lived in the mansion. He gave me a clue to understanding the situation of the terrace garden. The first owner, who built the mansion in 1917, was a contractor as well as a city politician. He cleverly convinced the city to build an impressive and distinguished street with the terrace garden just in front of his main entrance. The Lyon stair became San Francisco’s most exclusive street steps in a location where practically nobody except the politician needed them.

Although the stair’s landing visually belongs to the mansion, the city owns it. City street cleaners in their bright orange uniforms periodically invade the space with their brooms and noisy equipment to clean and refresh the garden street. The city politician’s influence still prevails, even from his grave.



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- 4 Lyon Stair, lower portion looking south
- 5 Lyon Stair, lower portion looking north
- 6 Stairs from Vallejo Street to terrace
- 7 Street sign below terrace
- 8 Stairs from Vallejo Street to terrace
- 9 Terrace with mansion



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III

The uppermost part of the Lyon stair, from the terrace garden to Broadway, lies on a 30 percent slope. It consists of several straight and narrow flights of stairs, which run in the middle of the street. Concrete curbs border the stair and separate it from the bushes on each side. What distinguishes this section of the Lyon stair from other long narrow sidewalk steps are the missing incidental factors. The remote course of steps is not interrupted by driveways or entrances. The stair in the middle of the street looks independent of the environment and follows its own system.



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The system is very geometric. In projection it has two symmetrical axes, a main longitudinal axis and a cross axis, which bisects it at a right angle at a wider landing, which is emphasized by a concrete bench never used by anyone. Within each bisected half the system is again symmetrical. The newly created symmetrical half can be further divided into symmetrical systems.

Walking up and down, parallel with the longitudinal axis, there is both repetition and irregularity, because diverse lengths of the landing alter the rhythm of the repeated flights and treads. It is still a system, a complex system, but not a symmetrical one. While we are walking on the stair, we do not keep the plan in our mind. Knowledge of the system differs from our personal kinesthetic and/or visual experience.

As we experience the stair with its environment the intention of the symmetry, which is formal balance, will be further lost. We see the different contour lines, colors, finishes, ornaments, and details of the surroundings. But our perception is not limited to the visual: our complete sensory system participates in the process of transmission. Sensuous impressions work collectively, but each affects us in its own way. Under all these influences, the axis of symmetry starts to dance, and the geometry, while we perceive it, lies in ruin. In this conglomeration, impressions and conceptions, reflections and notions roll into us like cumulus clouds and they cascade with us down the hill. Our conception of the stair is created within this larger context.

Conclusion

Complex architectural space, such as San Francisco's Lyon stair, provides for many kinds of emotional responses. The architectural setting is mostly static, but people may decide on their own pathways and moving patterns. The space and its experience are limited by the architectural environment, but they are not determined; the viewer has free choices too. They can walk in through the back door and leave from the main entrance; they can approach the court from below or from above; they can hesitate and wander from corner to corner in a circle or back and forth at will. The architect can hold people's hands only loosely to influence people to follow the designed choreography.

The two flights of stairs coming from the hill to the terrace are identical, but their settings are different. One stair leads people to the mansion's main entrance and directly past the formal dining room. The stair on the other side passes under branches and bushes and arrives next to the niche at the end of the terrace. The wanderer must make a choice between an urban and a natural environment.

Differences in the environment and in people's moods determine how they will experience and interpret the space. Some people may walk to the right to peek through the window, to try to spy on the secrets of the house, or to identify with the dwellers inside. Others may turn left and look at the building as a spectator from a comfortable distance or enjoy the puzzling



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- 10 Terrace, looking north
- 11 Lyon Stair, upper portion looking south from terrace
- 12 Lyon Stair, upper portion looking south



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13 Landing and bench, upper portion looking southwest

14 Lyon Stair, upper portion looking south

world of the forest. People have to decide between the two settings, two approaches, and two dissimilar atmospheres and moods in accordance with their mentality. Spatial experience is always improvisational; the building just provides opportunity.

The designers of the Lyon stair discovered the latent advantages of the form. They turned the direction of the stair more than once so that the faces and profiles could be seen simultaneously. They playfully enlarged the landings, one even became a palace court; they employed buttresses and balustrades wherever they could. The Lyon stair, owing to its length, is already dramatic, but the drama has been further intensified with the contrasting proportions of the stairs: for as its very long vertical portion is crossed at the bottom with horizontal forms, and as the

narrow flights widen into a delta, the entire staircase enhances the perspectival illusion. And at the top the "infinite" end vanishes into mystery.

The Lyon stair is in the center of a drama between the mansions and the forest, and these contrasting worlds collide above the stair. Geometry and harmony are undermined by forces stronger than Renaissance dignity. Conscious architectural planning can only be a part of a larger process where unexpected, ad hoc elements and the environment play equally important roles. The three portions of the Lyon stair, the wildly romantic, the elegant, the geometric, have their own role and character. Each makes its impact on us in a unique way. The beauty of this row of steps is that it can stimulate and indulge a very complex set of ideas within us.