

Vertically Challenged

Giovanni Savino

Abstract

Photo Essay

The winner is on the top. The loser is on the bottom.

The pyramidal structure of modern society could not be better represented than by the architectural development of New York City.

These images are from a long-term project of mine in the city I learned, or perhaps forced myself, to call "home."

They are portraits I made walking the streets, without stopping in my walk, holding the camera well below my hips, trying to specifically frame (or de-frame) my serendipitous subjects to magnify their existence in the imposing, sometimes ominous man-made canyons above them.

The verticality of New York City perfectly depicts the induced necessity of a social ascent and obviously the cruel reality of its antithesis.

If you are rich and successful, you get to be on the top floors, to see the sun, to enjoy a wide-angle view of the man-made landscape surrounding you. If you are not rich, you are confined at ground level, walking in the shadows forced upon you by the imposing skyscrapers of capitalism.

The obvious desire here is to rise up, by any means, even if it means trampling on the masses of people that inevitably will never rise, those multitudes that will be confined to live, or worse, merely survive, at ground level, forever.

Since the events of September 11, 2001, one could easily notice a further restriction to gaining access to the top floors of buildings. I remember being friendly allowed in the past to access the highest floors of many NY buildings, to photograph and film from there. Not anymore. The long lines of tourists still trying to enjoy for a few minutes the majestic views from the Empire State Building observatory or from the recently built Liberty Tower, not only are charged a hefty entry ticket but are also patted down and x-rayed by security guards in an airport-like fashion.

Access to the top floors today is being restricted more than ever.

Being on the top, on the highest floor, is a privilege that only a few can claim, a privilege defended by a private army of people who usually spend their whole working life in the lobby, or even in the basement of their employer's building, just looking up, towards the light of privilege, challenged, in hope, in desire, in envy, sometimes—in anger.



Fig. 1. *Vertically Challenged*, #20. Photo credit: Giovanni Savino.



Fig. 2. *Vertically Challenged*, #58. Photo credit: Giovanni Savino.



Fig. 3. *Vertically Challenged*, #3. Photo credit: Giovanni Savino.



Fig. 4. *Vertically Challenged*, #11. Photo credit: Giovanni Savino.



Fig. 5. *Vertically Challenged*, #43. Photo credit: Giovanni Savino.



Fig. 6. *Vertically Challenged*, #38. Photo credit: Giovanni Savino.



Fig. 7. *Vertically Challenged*. #26. Photo credit: Giovanni Savino.



Fig. 8. *Vertically Challenged*. #22. Photo credit: Giovanni Savino.



Fig. 9. *Vertically Challenged*, #53. Photo credit: Giovanni Savino.



Fig. 10. *Vertically Challenged*, #1. Photo credit: Giovanni Savino.

About the author

Giovanni Savino is a Renaissance man who was born in Italy over half a century ago and calls New York City home.

He spent the last thirty years of his career covering hard news around the world and researching disappearing oral traditions, trying to preserve this rapidly fading cultural heritage through still photography, documentary films and audio recordings.

Giovanni has been lecturing extensively in major universities and was invited to present his multimedia work about stateless Haitian migrants at the first TEDx Mediterranean event in Cannes, France.

He is currently involved in various commercial and visual art projects while still pursuing his passion of photographing and recording the ephemeral.