On Campus

Going Vertical

By
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|
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I was home for Thanksgiving break, and Kansas had never been flatter. The Great Plains sky arched overhead, exposing and bewildering me. Since when was I agoraphobic? I realized that my discomfort stemmed from the absence of my freshman-year landmarks—Low Library and Butler no longer bounded my existence, and the Empire State Building, my compass needle, was gone. I had only odd-numbered highways to convey a sense of direction. I felt the longing for New York City that creeps up for many Columbia students during the holidays when they go back to their hometowns. Maybe it was the giant blueberry or pesto dough rings masquerading as bagels, or the constant friendliness of other people—home suddenly felt alien.

Could I have changed so much in three months? I think every Columbian does. Classmates always nod their heads when I tell this story. “It’s a virus,” someone said. “New York gets in you and never leaves.”

The biggest shocker of arriving in New York from Kansas is going vertical. From building height to the cost of a movie ticket, New York is indisputably tall. Growing up in a flatland, punctuated occasionally by bumps optimistically called “hills,” I grew used to seeing all paths laid out before me, stretching to the same horizon. New York shatters flatness, as skyscrapers—other people’s aspirations —intrude into your view. If you don’t find height and constant striving ambition inspiring, New York will feel oppressive, cold, and mean. I took to the verticality after a few weeks of stressful assimilation into a world of options. From trying to choose the best teachers from the huge course directory to figuring out that the 2/3 train won’t deposit me at 116th Street and Broadway, life suddenly got much more complicated. However, after this difficult stretch, the limitless possibilities of our global City, the chance to compete and collaborate with so many highly talented

people, and the ability to keep growing and learning in such diverse ways appealed not only to me, but to all who wish to be lifelong students of the City.

While I'm loath to argue that form and design dictate our behavior, there's something to be said for the ease of mixing in New York. In the sprawl that is leapfrogging over the wheat and soybean fields of Kansas, uses are strictly segregated. You have separate places to live, shop, and work, with asphalt, iron, or stone barriers keeping everything apart. Land-use zoning, home prices, and consumer preferences segregate populations by income, class, and race, stranding you with the same slice of the demographic pie for most of your life.

This is not to give any illusions about New York. The same forces are at work in the City, creating enclaves of class and ethnicity. Doormen guard our vertical "gated communities," and there are plenty of dead super-blocks with residential towers-in-the-park. Yet, our proximity to each other allows everyone to interact easily. While we have our own neighborhoods that tend to house people of similar socioeconomic backgrounds, a subway ride or stroll down the block brings you face-to-face with an unfamiliar experience. Whether it involves couscous, salsa dancing, or the waft of Haitian *Kreyol*, that encounter is moments from your ordinary routine.

Anonymity is difficult to pull off in Kansas. Once you find a public space—invariably a mall—the security guard keeps you under a baleful stare and your schoolmates, who also have nowhere else to go, recognize you and pull you along into an afternoon of bad movies. New York allows you to disappear, to make your business only your own—a welcome feature to those longing to escape the seemingly constant scrutiny in small towns.

After returning to New York freshman year, I remember seeing artist Saul Steinberg's iconic *View of the World from 9th Avenue* suspended over the couch at my friend's apartment. The picture presents a bird's-eye view of the world from Manhattan. From the New Yorker's vantage point, everything west of the Hudson is flat, save for some tall mountains sprinkled across the plains. While off the artist's canvas, points west have their own tall aspects, the view from New York is uniquely thrilling. Allowing the energy and humanity to seep in after stepping out of the subway into Times Square makes me want to close my eyes, breathe deeply, turn to a friend, and say, "We're not in Kansas anymore."

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