Like Blood to the Veins: Escalators, their History, and the Making of the Modern World
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This thesis discusses the impact and history of the escalator in architectural applications since its creation in the nineteenth century, a story left largely untold despite the devices’ ubiquity. Tracing the story of the escalator from its obscure beginnings in Massachusetts to its vibrant applications in Asia, the author examines the mechanism, utilization patterns, and materials construction of this vertical transportation machine. Attention is paid to the personal stories of several innovators: Jesse Reno and Charles Seeberger are highlighted for their contributions to the industry. A study of escalator precedents (funicular railways, paternosters, elevators), the major uses (retail and transportation), challenges to escalator installations (safety and accessibility), and a review of current industry leaders in escalator manufacturing, their practice, and products is also provided. Preservation of escalators is advocated for through close examination with three case studies in the United States, which focus on the use of different materials, design significance (including the nation’s first spiral escalator), escalator in-building context, and important manufacturers. The argument is made to recognize escalators for their contributions to the design, expansion, and prosperity of the department store, an acknowledgement which has heretofore not been sufficiently made by historians.