According to an Italian saying, “Il mondo è fatto a scale, c’è chi scende e c’è chi sale,” or, in English translation: “The world is made like stairs: there are those who walk down and those who walk up.” While the proverb is meant to provide a fatalistic account of individual destinies, it can also be applied to innovations, medical or otherwise: some meet with success, others end in failure and are quickly forgotten. The saying, however, glosses over an important point: stairs do not generally consist solely of steps, they are regularly interrupted by landings or platforms marking each floor. Without these platforms, stairs would have no purpose nor would they exist qua stairs. In turn, platforms are not simply convenient resting places between steps; rather, they give access to apartments and living rooms. This book is about platforms and the rooms to which they give access.

Stairs and platforms in general follow simple paths. We prefer to think of them as in one of the famous Escher drawings where a number of stairs and platforms lead into each other without a clear sense of vertical hierarchy. In other words, we are not interested in linear paths, with well-established beginnings and ends, for we recognize the retrospective existence of multiple paths. In fact, we are not even interested in paths per se but, rather, in the materials and conventions that have been used to design them. We are interested in scattered platforms that interrupt paths and, often, launch them in new directions, providing for both continuities and discontinuities.

Our book analyzes biomedical platforms. For reasons that should become clear to readers, we do not think that there are social science platforms. This does not mean that we were able to complete this book without material and conceptual contributions from a number of social science sources. Let us start with financial support. Research for this book has been made possible by several grants. The Social Sciences and
Humanities Research Council of Canada awarded us two successive grants, on “Standards, Instruments and Techniques in the Biological and Biomedical Sciences” (1994–97) and on “Scientific Instrumentalities and the Transformation of Medical Judgment after World War II” (1997–2000). Since 1994, Quebec’s Fonds FCAR (now FQRSC) has provided ongoing support for our research program on the regulation of biomedical practices entitled “Techno-scientific Innovations, Biomedical Research and Clinical Interventions.” Between 1994 and 1997, the Hannah Institute for the History of Medicine of Associate Medical Services, Inc. (Toronto) provided funds for a more restricted project on visualization in the biomedical sciences, traces of whose results can be seen in chapter 8. The Burroughs Wellcome Fund also contributed decisively to this book by granting to one of the coauthors (P.K.) an award to spend a year at the National Humanities Center, Research Triangle Park, in North Carolina and to the other coauthor (A.C.) a 40th Anniversary Award in the History of Medicine to spend a year in a place of his choice. Additional travel funds were provided to A.C. in 1999 by the Wellcome Institute for the History of Medicine (London) and the Max Planck Institute for the History of Science (Berlin). During 2001, the French Institut National pour la Santé et la Recherche Médicale awarded A.C. a one-year position as a Senior Invited Researcher in the Unit 379 Épidémiologie et sciences sociales appliquées à l’innovation médicale, in Marseilles. Last but not least, both our universities have granted us a sabbatical year during the preparation of this book: P.K. spent it in part at the Mario Negri Institute in Santa Maria Imbaro, Italy (1997–98) and A.C. at the Centre de Sociologie de l’Innovation de l’École des Mines in Paris (1996–97).

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In addition to archival work, interviews with more than eighty scientists, clinicians, and company officials in the United States, Canada, United Kingdom, France, Germany, the Netherlands, and Italy provided a rich documentary basis for this book. Many of these individuals went out of their way to provide unpublished material, correspondence, advice, and close readings of preliminary chapters. They are, in an important sense, less social science “subjects” than valued collaborators. An appendix at the end of this book, giving the list of those who accepted to be interviewed (a few, repeatedly) for this project, is our way of thanking each of them by name. Without their help and understanding, we could simply not have written this book. We see their collaboration as further proof that the history and sociology of science and medicine need not result in “science wars,” which are more the product of the disgruntled imagination of a few philosophers or scientists turned ideologues.
Earlier versions of “platform sociology” were presented at a number of meetings, namely the 1997 (Tucson) and 1998 (Halifax) meetings of the Society for Social Studies of Science (4S), the 1998 Lisbon conference of the European Association for the Study of Science and Technology (EASST), the 1998 International Conference on Science, Technology and Society (Tokyo, Hiroshima, and Kyoto), and the 2000 meeting of the American Association for the History of Medicine (Bethesda, Md.). Additional presentations of our ideas on platforms as they were taking shape were presented at several invited talks, including those at the Center for the Sociology of Innovation (École des Mines, Paris, 1996 and 2001), the INSERM Unit 158 (Paris, 1996), Centre for Research into Innovation, Culture and Technology (CRICT) Brunel University (Uxbridge, Middlesex, 1999), the Max Planck Institute for the History of Science (Berlin, 1999), the University of Freiburg (1999), the University of Lausanne (2001), the École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales (Paris, 2001), the University of Perugia (2001), and the INSERM Unit 379 (Marseilles, 2001). On each of these occasions we profited from the comments and criticisms of the participants.

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Although the material used in this book has been entirely rewritten and refocused around the notion of a biomedical platform, several chapters draw from previous publications. An initial, general overview of our argument was presented in:


Scattered components of our argument, not yet connected by the notion of a platform, were included in the following texts:


Finally, we would like to thank Kisho Kurokawa for sending us a photograph of one of the buildings he designed and granting us permission to use it for the cover picture of this book.