University of Reading

Between the image and the building: an architectural tour of 'High-Rise'

Article

Accepted Version

Butt, A. ORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1762-2768 (2016) Between the image and the building: an architectural tour of 'High-Rise'. Critical Quarterly, 58 (1). pp. 76-83. ISSN 1467-8705 doi: 10.1111/criq.12247 Available at https://centaur.reading.ac.uk/79102/

It is advisable to refer to the publisher's version if you intend to cite from the work. See Guidance on citing.

To link to this article DOI: http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/criq.12247

Publisher: Wiley

All outputs in CentAUR are protected by Intellectual Property Rights law, including copyright law. Copyright and IPR is retained by the creators or other copyright holders. Terms and conditions for use of this material are defined in the End User Agreement.

www.reading.ac.uk/centaur

CentAUR

Central Archive at the University of Reading

University of Reading

Reading's research outputs online

Between the image and the building: an architectural tour of 'High-Rise'

Amy Butt

> Their real opponent was not the hierarchy of residents in the heights far above them, but the image of the building in their own minds, the multiplying layers of concrete that anchored them to the floor.[1]

As an architect and avid science fiction reader, whenever I introduce my dual passions for the first time I am inevitably asked "So you must love JG Ballard then?" The science fiction author of choice for architects, J. G. Ballard's writing contains a subversive appreciation for the power of the built environment; its potential to change the individual and society. [2]

In Ballard's 1975 novel 'High-Rise' the building is more than a backdrop or plot device, it acts as the central protagonist in a narrative of social disintegration. It both permits and facilitates the darkest desires of its residents, makes manifest their subconscious desires[3] and physically extracts them from the rules of the society they once inhabited. As Ballard has described, 'their behaviour only makes sense if you assume they want this apparent descent into barbarism … the environment makes possible the whole set of unfolding logics.'[4]

In Ben Wheatley's 2015 film adaptation, the high-rise as designed and realised by Mark Tildesley conveys this atmosphere of barely repressed menace through its spatial form and materiality. I propose that Wheatley's high-rise is an active participant in its residents' fall from grace, a spatial incitement to social violence.

Rather than follow the film's narrative sequence I take an architectural tour; and you have my apologies for the spoilers that this entails, in order to appreciate 'High-Rise' as both an architectural site and a protagonist, a space whose influence is always forcefully present directing its inhabitants' actions. As we move through Wheatley's high-rise from the ground floor to the penthouse, I refer to Ballard's novel as a guidebook to this imagined place, a tower transformed by the intervening forty years of regeneration.

Approaching the tower from the outside, the high-rise which forms the setting of the narrative sits as one of five towers arranged around a central open plaza. From this vantage point, Dr Laing, the tower's 'most perfect inhabitant' is able to observe the other towers in their varying stages of construction[5]. They encircle him and, as he watches their construction the connections between this place and the world outside are bricked up. The landscape beyond is flattened, transformed into mere backdrop scenery. This differs from the novel, where the group of towers loom like a 'palisade' [6] overshadowing the suburban streets in which they sit and metaphorically overpowering traditional society as represented in the bland ubiquity of suburban housing. Here the encircling complex of tower's control is more absolute, there is no need to demonstrate defiance of previous modes of living, they are simply rendered irrelevant. For Laing and the other residents, the completeness of the surrounding towers divorces them from life beyond their high-rise. Its power over their lives is as absolute as its dominance over the landscape.[7]

Looking up from ground level, the form of the tower itself further encourages this mental retreat from life beyond its walls. In Wheatley's interpretation it has an angled slant part way up like the crooked bend of a finger, creating an immediacy between the roof top and the ground on one side with nothing but air between them. On the other side of the tower, it establishes an intimacy between the floors as the angle allows for balconies to directly overlook one another, creating a clearly defined hierarchy of power.[8]

As we enter and move up through the building we ascend through these tiers of social stratification, stopping first at the flat of film maker Richard Wilder and his family on the 5th floor of this 40 storey tower. There is no distinction between the materials of the corridors and the foyer and those of the flats, the exposed plaster and concrete are raw and unapologetic, a physical metaphor for the psyche which the high-rise cultivates. Inside Wilder's apartment sections of bush-hammered concrete project into the rooms, appearing to push through the internal walls, the rough ridged texture an expression of the brute force of their construction. [9] Seemingly unsuited to the tower's brutish nature, Helen Wilder has attempted to softened its edges by decorating their apartment with floral prints, furniture and house plants. These attempts serve only to heighten the psychological impact of these materials, hard and unyielding they offer no scope to be softened by human inhabitation, rather they demand that the inhabitant be remade to fit.

On this floor, as throughout the building, exposed concrete columns sit in the centre of rooms, disrupting the lives they contain and making the building's physical form impossible to ignore. They are tapered in a modernist reinterpretation of classical entasis, physically expressing the load of the building above which they bear, and they act as a constant reminder of the levels above. [10] In the novel the psychological 'weight' of the building is felt particularly strongly at the lower levels, and it pushes the film-maker Wilder to ascend the tower and confront the architect. [11] By comparison these tapered columns throughout the floors make the force of the building ever-present, and this symptom of lower class strife is transformed into a psychological pressure which the building bears on all its inhabitants.

As Wilder attempts to scale the tower he makes slow progress up through the stair wells, over barricades and under assault from the floors above. They are a featureless extension of the corridors, and the site of more entrenched class division. In the novel, Ballard dwells on these spaces of circulation to make manifest the human tendency towards tribal division, providing the residents with a social hierarchy defined by floors which could be delineated and defended, until even these tribal bands dissipated into their isolated individuals.[12] Wheatley shifts our focus from the stair well to the lift as a contested space, and in doing so renders the subtle floor by floor gradation and its associated arbitrary tribal affiliation less immediately apparent.

As we climb further up the tower of the film, on the 10th floor, we find the public spaces of the supermarket and the swimming pool. Initially sterile monuments to modernist visions of health, their communal use establishes them as the first contested spaces and obvious sites for tribal violence, and they rapidly degenerate into squalid and fetid spaces. Laing, driven by a desire to make a home for himself in this new vision of high-rise life ventures out to the supermarket where amongst the rotting produce sits the last tin of house-hold paint, and he

viciously attacks another resident, using the paint tin as a weapon in order to claim it. It is his first act of intentional and disproportionate violence and it marks his participation in this part of the life of the tower.

When Laing first moves in to his apartment on the 25th floor, we see it in its uninhabited state, the concrete column in the centre, the hard sheen of the stainless steel worktops and bare plaster, all exposed and unadorned. Wheatley introduces Laing's act of decorating his flat into the narrative, and it provides a demonstration of the shift in his role within the high-rise, from passive observer to dis-interested participant. The paint colour he has chosen is an exact match to the slate blue/grey of the sky seen from his balcony, unmarred by clouds and utterly detached from the ground below, the true site of the high-rise[13]. As he paints he stacks up his unpacked moving boxes, wedging them on top of one another until they sit as compressed towers or columns between floor and ceiling. They are physical and psychological totems, supports which prevent the weight of the tower above from crushing him, and he makes a place for himself within a small scale cardboard replica of the tower complex he now calls home.

Out on the balcony Laing's flat is directly overlooked by that of Charlotte Melville and she is able to balance her drink delicately on the ledge and calmly observe him below, vulnerable to the dropped bottle or the disdainful downward glance. She becomes a voyeur, physically close but emotionally distant from all she observes. The casual nature of their interaction belies the precariousness of their physical location, the cascading effect of the balconies which tumble down the face of the building demands that the residents adjust to a life on the edge of falling.

On the other side of the tower the projecting face of the building offers no resistance to the suicidal leap of Munrow from his balcony, rather it seems to invite the experience of vertigo and the contemplation of falling. As his corpse lies below, the tower's form allows the residents to observe his death from their balconies, crowding over his body while retaining their physical and emotional distance. Ballard describes these balconies as 'boxes from an enormous outdoor opera theatre'[14], the building transforming life outside into something unreal, played out for amusement, observed from a position of privileged detachment.[15]

Taking the lift up the final floors, its mirror lining reflects its role as a transformative space, where the outward projection of the self is endlessly replicated. Wheatley uses the lift as a source of juxtaposition and a critical space of instantaneous social reinvention. It lifts Laing up to the dizzying heights of the penthouse elite and just as quickly spits him back out, used and beaten. In contrast to Ballard's focus on the subtle layering of social strata expressed in the stairwells, Wheatley creates a stronger differentiation of class and tribal identity, and a greater incitement to violence[16].

On reaching the top floor of the tower we are confronted by the sight of an architectural folly, a thatched cottage in an English country garden. It is a space entirely out of context, lavish in its scale and denial of its physical location. It allows Royal's wife to act out the part of Marie Antoinette, dismissing the world outside and the brutality of high-rise existence as literally beneath her. In Wheatley's interpretation, the roof exists as an exclusive playground for the super-rich, a further demonstration of class differentiation through wealth and taste,

a testament to stratified privilege. It makes visible a social system so entrenched and iniquitous that its dissolution into the anarchy of the individual seems almost inevitable.[17]

This is a departure from the use of the roof in the novel where it is a sculptural children's playground, an echo of the playground at the top of Le Corbusier's Unite d'Habitation and a visible reminder of the moral complexity of Royal's intentions and, by inference, those of all modernist architects. [18] The playground is a demonstration of a noble social vision, a dedication of the most valuable space to a communal purpose. Through this space Royal is understood to be a mis-guided patriarch, a Frankenstein bemused, dismayed and finally destroyed by his own creation.

In a corner of the penthouse garden sits the studio of the tower's architect, Anthony Royal, who proudly displays an architectural model of the finished blocks, describing them as fingers on a welcoming 'open hand'. Tellingly, the model extends no further than the site boundary, it is context-less, conceptually limiting the inhabitant's lives to the spaces Royal has created. [19]

In the novel, Wilder ascends the stairs to confront Royal on the roof top, and as he climbs he continually smears the stains of this collapsing society across his face as a form of war paint; the blood and grease worn as proud testament to its decent into violence. In Wheatley's interpretation, Wilder's application of a war paint is mirrored by Laing, who streaks the grey paint of his apartment across his suit, face and hands. Where Wilder celebrates the fleeting burn of violence in the high-rise, Laing embodies its underlying cause; an emotional and physical distancing from society and an ability to thrive in isolation, an almost psychotic break from previous empathetic connection.[20] Through this middle-class, and ever-so-tasteful war-paint, Laing engages with the high-rise as home, he has remade himself to fit, and the last vestiges of his life in the outside world are remade by the stains of this new one.

Ballard's novel, used the high-rise as a method for exploring the alien worlds of the inner self, transformed and released by the technological reshaping of the built environment, an extrapolative response to discussions around environmental determinism.[21] Throughout the novel the building encourages its residents to release some inner primitive self, a self which exists outside of notions of society. In this the building is a gateway, the height distances residents from their surroundings and the social rules which govern them, while the stratification of floors encourages tribal violence. In doing so it triggers the release of a repressed part of all of the residents, something they actively desired but were afraid to ever want.

In Wheatley's interpretation the high-rise plays a more active role and it pushes the residents towards anarchy through its physical presence. Through its architectural form it enforces a detachment from the world beyond its walls and places the residents in spaces which heighten their sense of physical vulnerability and emotional isolation. Within the tower its distinct social stratification demands violent dissolution, while the exposed materiality and spatial arrangement expresses uncompromising force and demands that residents remake themselves to fit.

Revisited in the London of 2015 the construction of a high-rise of forty storeys seems modestly sized by comparison to the cities we currently inhabit, a quaint throwback to an earlier vision of the future. But the fear that Wheatley conveys has, if anything, become more overwhelming; the fear that the sheer scale of the cities we construct grants them an unknown power to radically reshape our societies and our selves, the fear that our built environment may render us obsolete.

---

[1] J. G. Ballard, *High-Rise* (London: HarperCollins, 2012), 58.

[2] For discussions regarding the relevance of the writing of JG Ballard to architecture and urban studies, see for example; Lucy Hewitt and Stephen Graham, 'Vertical Cities: Representations of Urban Verticality in 20th-Century Science Fiction Literature', *Urban Studies* 52, no. 5 (2015): 923–37. Simon Sellars, 'Stereoscopic Urbanism: JG Ballard and the Built Environment', *Architectural Design* 79, no. 5 (2009): 82–87. Jonathan Taylor, 'The Subjectivity of the near Future: Geographical Imaginings in the Work of J G Ballard', in *Lost in Space: Geographies of Science Fiction*, 2002. Nic Clear, ed., *Architectures of the near Future: Architectural Design* (John Wiley and Sons, Ltd., 2009). and Zeynep Ultav, 'Reading Science Fiction Novels as an Architectural Research', *The 'Radical' Designist*, no. 1 (2006).

[3] Jonathan Taylor draws on the work of Steve Pile (1996) and Laura Colombino (2013) to discuss Ballard's work in terms of surrealism and psychoanalysis, where the built environment can be read as a physical manifestations of the unconscious. Taylor, 'The Subjectivity of the near Future: Geographical Imaginings in the Work of J G Ballard'.

[4] J.G Ballard quoted in Vivian Vale and Andrea Juno, *J.G. Ballard* (San Francisco, Calif.; Enfield: V/Search Publications ; Airlift [distributor], 1984), 162.

[5] 'Dr Laing, staring out all day from his balcony under the fond impression that he was totally detached from the high-rise, when in fact he was probably its most true tenant.' Ballard, *High-Rise*, 74.

[6] 'The five apartment buildings on the eastern perimeter of the mile-square project formed a massive palisade that by dusk had already plunged the suburban streets behind them into darkness. The high-rises seemed almost to challenge the sun itself …' Ibid., 19.

[7] This association of the height of a building with a sense of control has been explored in depth by spatial theorists, and Louis Marin hypothesized that the very visibility of a tower, over the tops of surrounding buildings ensures it exists in what he terms 'the immediacy of an absolute presence' the viewer is forced to define all other places in reference to it, within its sphere of visibility its influence is absolute. Louis Marin, 'Frontiers of Utopia: Past and Present', *Critical Inquiry*, 1993, 397–420.

[8] For discussions regarding implied hierarchy of the vertical see for example: Lucy Hewitt and Stephen Graham, 'Getting off the Ground On the Politics of Urban Verticality', *Progress in Human Geography* 37, no. 1 (2013): 72–92.

[9] Bush-hammered concrete refers to a process by which the smooth finished layer of concrete is removed to expose the aggregate stones and create a rough or serrated texture, achieved either by hand chiseling or using a percussive pneumatic hammer.

[10] Entasis refers to the curve added to a column thickening it around the center, historically noted in Greek temple design. It is commonly understood as a corrective to make columns appear straight, but is also applied in a more exaggerated fashion where the intention appears to be the expression of load or strain, of the weight of the building pressing down.

[11] '[Wilder] was constantly aware of the immense weight of concrete stacked above him … conscious of each of the 999 other apartments pressing on him through the walls and ceiling, forcing the air from his chest.' Ballard, *High-Rise*, p48.

[12] 'For the next two hours a series of running battles took place in the corridors and staircases, moving up and down the floors as barricades were reassembled and torn down again.' Ibid., 108. 'However, the open tribal conflicts of the previous week had now clearly ceased. With the breakdown of the clan structure, the formal boundary and armistice lines had dissolved, giving way to a series of small enclaves, a cluster of three of four isolated apartments.' Ibid., 126.

[13] 'These huge buildings had won their attempt to colonise the sky.' Ballard, *High-Rise*, 19.

[14] 'All around, people were leaning on their railings, glasses in hand, staring down through the darkness.
Far below, embedded in the crushed roof of a car in the front rank, was the body of a man in evening dress. … Laing held tightly to the metal bar, shocked and excited at the same time. Almost every balcony on the huge face of the high-rise was now occupied, the residents gazing down as if from their boxes in an enormous outdoor opera house.' Ibid., 41.
It is worth noting that in the novel this suicide is of an unknown jeweller, barely recognised by Laing, where as in Wheatley's interpretation Laing bears some direct responsibility for the medical student's decision to leap, a reflection of his more active role in the psychological violence of the high-rise.

[15] This shift in the attitude of the viewer at height is what literary theorist David Nye terms 'magisterial vision' in which the physical detachment of the tower from its surroundings, and thus the viewer from the ground, provokes a mental detachment, and abstract reasoning becomes the only way to consider the outside world, rendering the view meaningless. David E Nye, *American Technological Sublime* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1994).

[16] The lived reality of lifts within towers and their social role has been studied by human geographers such as Donald McNeill, 'Skyscraper Geography', *Progress in Human Geography* 29, no. 1 (1 February 2005): 41–55.

[17] For contemporary discussion on the exclusive role of the rooftop see for example: Oliver Wainwright, 'The "sky Pool" Is Just the Start: London Prepares for a Flood of Bathing Oligarchs', *The Guardian*, 20 August 2015, sec. Art and design, http://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/architecture-design-blog/2015/aug/20/london-sky-pool-trend-swimming-oligarch.

[18] Completed in 1952, Le Corbusier's Unite d'Habitation in Marseilles has been argued as one possible source of inspiration for Ballard's high-rise and the public facilities on the roof included a nursery, a running track and pools for paddling and swimming, all formed from highly sculptural concrete forms. (for discussions on Ballard and Le Corbusier see for example: Jeff Hicks, 'Residential Differentiation in the Vertical Cities of J. G. Ballard and Robert Silverberg', in *Marxism and Urban Culture*, ed. Benjamin Fraser, 2014, 137–56. Andrzej Gąsiorek, *J.G. Ballard*, Contemporary British Novelists (Manchester; New York: Manchester University Press; Palgrave, 2005), 108.)

[19] 'Already his attention was fixed on the events taking place within the high-rise, as if this huge building existed solely in his mind and would vanish if he stopped thinking about it … As he walked across the parking-lot Laing looked back at the high-rise, aware that he was leaving part of his mind behind him.' Ballard, *High-Rise*, 34.

[20] 'A new social type was being created by the apartment building, a cool, unemotional personality impervious to the psychological pressures of high-rise life, with minimal needs for privacy, who thrived like an advanced species of machine in the neutral atmosphere. … Perhaps the recent incidents represented a last attempt by Wilder and the airline pilots to rebel against this unfolding logic? Sadly, they had little chance of success, precisely because their opponents were people who were content with their lives in the high-rise, who felt no particular objection to an impersonal steel and concrete landscape … These people were the first to master a new kind of late twentieth-century life. They thrived on the rapid turnover of acquaintances, the lack of involvement with others, and the total self-sufficiency of lives which, needing nothing, were never disappointed.' Ibid., 36.

[21] Debates about the over-simplification of an deterministic reading of the physical environment are summarised by Karen Franck, as concerns regarding the "exaggeration of the influence of the physical environment, its assumption that the physical environment has only a direct influence on behaviours, its perception of people as passive in the environment-behaviour relationship with no choice or goals, and its assumption that the environment is a constant unlikely to be changed or modified". K. A. Franck, 'Exorcising the Ghost of Physical Determinism', *Environment and Behavior* 16, no. 4 (1 July 1984): 412.