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Luckhurst, Roger (2016) High-Rise 1975/2015. *Critical Quarterly* 58 (1), pp. 63-69. ISSN 0011-1562.

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'High-Rise 1975/2015'

Roger Luckhurst

I

By 1975, J. G. Ballard had perfected a tone for his satires that he called 'terminal irony, where not even the writer knows where he stands.'¹ This neutral, amoral mode, with no authorial or narrative guide-rail, leaves the sociological experiment conducted in *High-Rise* extremely ambiguous. Was Ballard at one with the critique of the Modernist 'City of Towers' that had been growing since the middle of the 1960s? Or was he pursuing another kind of Modernist logic, coiled within utopian planning, that took its ambition for a transformative psychopathology to its final, shattering conclusion?

Modernist utopias towered vertiginously in the clean lines of Malevich's Constructivist skyscraper *Gota 2-A* (1923-7), in Korda's sets for *Things to Come* (1936), or in the brooding sketches of 'the skyscraping heights of the Future City' in Hugh Ferriss's *The Metropolis of Tomorrow* (1929). Le Corbusier's *Vers Une Architecture* (1923) had dreamt of towers that would 'shelter the worker' and 'bring efficiency and economy of time and effort and as a natural result the peace of mind which is so necessary.' Above the fourteenth floor, Le Corbusier promised 'absolute calm and the purest air'.² In Marseilles, Le Corbusier's L'Unité d'Habitation de Grandeur Conforme (The Standard Size Housing Block) was inaugurated in October 1952, the first element in the realization of the Radiant City. L'Unité was intended to be the first of eight blocks, to house twenty thousand people after a catastrophic loss of housing stock in the war. It had revolutionary social intent, which Le Corbusier claimed was being realized already, even before he had delivered his inaugural speech: 'Left to their own devices in the building ... these Marseille tenants rapidly formed an association, as a real vertical community without any political affiliation, to defend its interests and to develop its human values'.³ The building also announced a revolution in form: it was built 'without regulations – against disastrous regulations' and was one of the earliest experiments in concrete *brut* – raw and unfinished concrete, complete with the blemishes that retained the marks of its casting and construction. It would inspire the New Brutalism amongst the radical planners and architects of the post-war reconstruction. It directly influenced the Marxist architect Ernő Goldfinger, who trained in Paris in the 1920s, to build the 27-storey Balfron Tower in the London's East End in 1968 and the 31-storey Trellick Tower in West London in 1972.

The inspiration of L'Unité is evident in Ballard's *High-Rise*: he situates the self-service shopping centre half-way up the building and a gymnasium on the roof, just as Le Corbusier had done. And Goldfinger surely ghosts the enigmatic architect Anthony Royal. Goldfinger had famously moved into Flat 130 of the Balfron Tower for two months in 1968 to 'test' the design of the building (perhaps he got the idea from Berthold Lubetkin, who built the Modernist tower Highpoint in Highgate in 1935 and then moved into the penthouse). Goldfinger staged a sequence of drinks parties for the new residents, invited floor by floor. His wife, Ursula, took detailed sociological notes on their 'fieldwork'. It was an

effective publicity stunt to counter the image of the architect as a dictatorial and remote social engineer, and he did the same in the Trelick Tower.⁴ In Ballard's early 'Synopsis' of the novel (his extensive preliminary working notes), he has the architect play a much more active role than the empty cipher of the published novel, 'carrying with him a master set of keys to the main electrical switching system in the building, keys with which he can lock out various elevators and services.'⁵

But *High-Rise* cannot be read outside critiques of the tower block, fully established by 1975. Oscar Newman denounced them in his study of their 'disastrous effects' on the American inner city in *Defensible Space* in 1972:

In a high-rise, double-loaded corridor apartment tower, the only defensible space is the interior of the apartment itself; everything else is a 'no-man's-land', neither public nor private. The lobby, stairs, elevator and corridors are open and accessible to everyone. But unlike the well-peopled and continually surveyed public streets, these interior areas are sparsely used and impossible to survey; they become a nether world of fear and crime.⁶

Newman was soon in England, applying these findings to the massive Aylesbury Estate in South London, condemning it before it was even fully completed (the Aylesbury Estate was latter chosen as the symbolic backdrop of Britain's 'forgotten people' for Tony Blair's first major speech as prime minister in 1997). Estates soon became synonymous with inner city crime, mugging and racial violence. This happened at Trelick Tower, too, which soon acquired the nickname the 'Tower of Terror' and was tabloid fodder for reports of mugging, drug-use and sexual assaults in the lifts and communal hallways. Even supporters held that Goldfinger's towers on each approach to London had a 'minatory character', with detailing sourced from 'the artefacts of war' that imparted 'a delicate sense of terror.'⁷ In May 1975, Conrad Jameson reported on a GLC display of architectural plans hidden away in the basement of the Festival Hall that 'came at the end of a long and anguished argument amongst architects about what should replace the high-rise flats and massive apartment blocks that have so swiftly lost favour.'⁸

More iconically, the post-war utopian dream of mass social housing was often held to have been literally demolished in the early 70s, beginning on the 16 March 1972. This was when the first three buildings of the gigantic Pruitt-Igoe estate in Saint-Louis were dynamited, apparently putting an end to the high-density, high-tower solution to city living. Pruitt-Igoe was designed by the Modernist architect Minoru Yamasaki, who also built New York's World Trade Center. The complex was made up of thirty-three identical towers of eleven-storeys – a decision forced by strict budget caps, not design – and built around communal walkways and facilities. Completed in 1954, it was intended as a racially-integrated estate but chronic underfunding left it a poor black community, under-populated, under-funded and dangerous. Yamasaki was shocked by the violence and vandalism on the estate: 'I never thought people were that destructive', he said.⁹ In 1965, a few years before the rent strikes and protests of the radicalised African American community, *Architectural Forum*

had analysed Pruitt-Igoe as ‘the case history of a failure.’ The estate was systematically demolished, block by block, between 1973 and 1976. The architectural theorist Charles Jencks turned this into a myth of historical rupture when he opened his *Language of Post-Modern Architecture* in 1977 with the announcement that Modernism ended with the first detonation under the Pruitt-Igoe experiment.¹⁰

The dead-pan satire of Ballard’s *High-Rise* partly derives from transferring the language about the feral inner-city poor, reverting to savagery when unable to adjust to communal living, onto the middle-class that most articulate this fear. His block is full of wealthy professionals – psychiatrists, architects, TV directors, and gynaecologists (its most dated element is including academics amongst this well-paid executive class). Yet these are the ones that happily embrace the reversion to roving clans in the building. The regression to tribal primitivism, to hunter-gatherer activities, continual war and bride-capture raids against rival clans, suggest Ballard was also thinking about anthropologist Napoleon Chagnon’s controversial claims about the inherent human propensity for violence in his notorious books and films that followed in the wake of his best-selling account of the ‘untouched’ Amazonian tribe, *Yanomamo: The Fierce People* in 1968. Is Ballard complicit in this account, his satire conservative?

High-Rise is more subtle than this. Ballard’s experiment tests something that lodges within Modernist architectural theory. Goldfinger had argued early in his career that the nature of architecture’s enclosure of space produced a ‘psychological effect’ on those who traversed it. This *being within* ‘becomes manifest as the barriers (imaginary or real) enclosing space. A person within this defined space is subject to the subconscious *spatial sensation*.’ At its extremes, this could manifest in ‘mental disorders such as claustrophobia and agoraphobia.’¹¹ Goldfinger’s historical and materialist leanings insisted that these effects could be rationally and scientifically analysed, rather than resorting to the mysticism or ‘demonology’ of aesthetic theory, as he colourfully put it. Yet the *subconscious* effect of space already suggests that this might slide rapidly beyond rational control. At the end of Oscar Newman’s proposals to diminish the social and psychological terrors of high-rise living, the last paragraphs of *Defensible Space* muse with unease that these provisions could be applied utterly perversely:

Some might conclude that if it were found desirable, it might be possible to apply our findings in reverse. That is, for a malignant authority intentionally to set about developing environments which isolate people and elicit their antagonisms, fears, and paranoia... Our research indicates that even the most disadvantaged will not tolerate for very long extreme negativism in their living environment.¹²

This seems to me the incubator for Ballard’s experiment in *High-Rise*, but also a neat summation of a career investigating the psychic perversities induced by the geometries of modernity, from the exotic ‘exurbia’ of *Vermilion Sands* to the bland inducements to murderous violence of ‘Motel Architecture’ or *Cocaine Nights*. Ballard’s debts to the Surrealist movement meant a commitment to

subverting the Radiant City with the active welcome of the 'coming of the unconscious', the embrace of spatial and temporal derangement in di Chirico of Dali, or the 'disturbance in the ... relation between personality and space' in schizophrenia as explored by Roger Caillois in his essay on 'legendary psychasthenia'.¹³ Surrealism did not seek to cure neurosis but to exalt it, not to tranquilize the death drive but further irritate its compulsive repetitions.

In 1975, the closest descendant of this project was the anti-psychiatry movement. Laing is a generic name for a Ballard protagonist, one he only adopted late in the multiple drafts of *High-Rise*, but it inevitably invokes the renegade psychiatrist R. D. Laing, who had severed any relationship with conventional psychiatry with *The Politics of Experience* in 1967 and closed his experimental commune in 1970 (right on time, the 1972 documentary on Laing's psychiatric commune, *Asylum*, was re-released in 2015). By the mid-70s, Laing was more regularly on TV than in the treatment room. The South African revolutionary who coined the term 'anti-psychiatry', David Cooper, in his war on the bourgeois familial and social norms that induced madness, wrote in *The Grammar of Living*, first published in 1974: 'The strategy must be to use what destroys us to destroy what destroys us so as to liberate quite specific zones of hope.'¹⁴ *High-Rise* is the laboratory for coldly investigating this logic, amping the cool rationality of Modernist space up to deliver its own liberative destruction. Talbot, the psychiatrist in the block, explains calmly to Laing: 'I've obviously been picked out as a scapegoat. This building must have been a powerhouse of resentments – everyone's working off the most extraordinary backlog of infantile regressions.'¹⁵ In the destructive element immerse.

II

By 2015, the London residential high rise was the container for very different meanings. Newspapers charted the inexorable inflation of a London housing bubble with a paralysed mix of banality, horror and delight. This post-sub-prime zombie economics could be neatly condensed in the emblem of the luxury tower block, entirely transvalued from its associations with sink estates in the 60s and 70s. There had already been social media faux-rage about 'poor doors' – in which the resented rump of social housing provision enforced in privately developed housing complexes were given separate entrances to segregate public and private residents. Rows of spikes kept the homeless from sleeping in alcoves of the new gated communities.

In July, reports on the Aykon Tower, a fifty-storey Thames-side 'global symbol of opulence', with apartments offered complete with the hallucinatory nightmare bling of Donatella Versace's interior designs, was in the news not just for its separate, low-rise, poor-door housing, or for its £50 000 price-tag for a parking space, but because even the wealthiest buyers discovered on the frenzied opening day of sales that every river-facing apartment had already been pre-sold to overseas speculators in Hong Kong unlikely ever to live in the space.¹⁶ It seemed a pointed judgement that the winner of the 2015 Deutsche Börse Photography Prize was the project by Mikhael Subotzky and Patrick Waterhouse on the fugitive community of black squatters in the ruin of Johannesburg's 54-

storey signature skyscraper, Ponte City, originally built under the apartheid regime for the white elite.

Meanwhile, in August 2015, the New Brutalist masterpiece, Robin Hood Gardens in Poplar, the fullest statement of Alison and Peter Smithson's architecture, was again refused protected listing status by Historic England after years of being left in a suspended state and to suffer further decay. The local Labour MP, Jim Fitzpatrick, called for its immediate demolition, wanting to hurry the decision to counter the impressive array of the building's defenders.¹⁷ In the ceaseless churn of London development, this keystone of socialist planning needed to be downgraded or erased. The next month, almost as a rebuke, the planned demolition of the Red Road flats in Glasgow (an estate used as the setting for Andrea Arnold's 2006 film, *Red Road*) rather publicly failed, two blocks stubbornly refusing to collapse to plan.

Ben Wheatley's *High-Rise* appeared after the cluster of tower horror films, *Attack the Block* (Joe Cornish, 2011, shot in part on the condemned Heygate Estate in Elephant and Castle), *The Raid* (Gareth Evans, 2011), *Dredd* (Pete Travis, 2012) and *Containment* (Neil McEnery-West, 2015), films that all literalised social stratification in ascents or escapes from tower blocks. Wheatley's Ballard adaptation attempts, somewhat uneasily, to double-code *High-Rise* as both a 1975 and a 2015 film. 'The future Ballard was projecting was forward of '75,' Wheatley said, 'and we have lived into that future. We were making a futuristic film about a projected past and because we have seen what happened and Ballard saw it coming down the pipe... The film is a look at the book, from the perspective of the people that survived it. We are in a perpetual 70s/80s/90s. Boom followed by bust, then boom followed by bust again.'¹⁸

This view of Ballard as prophetic is something shared by London mythographer Iain Sinclair: the coming of the gleaming corporate towers of the 'enterprise free zone' of the London Docklands Development Corporation amidst the ruins of the East End docks is Thatcher's hex in Sinclair's novel *Downriver*, in which Cesar Pelli's tower at Canary Wharf is an occult object of voodoo economics plonked down in a Ballardian landscape. Wheatley similarly chooses to end *High-Rise* with images of Thatcher's arrival in power.

But this has the odd effect of smoothing over the historical transformation of the meanings of the tower block across forty years. It accounts for the decision in the film to amplify Anthony Royal and his penthouse crew as crude caricatures of sociopathic 1%ers, larding on the satire as they dress up in aristocratic *ancien regime* costumes and indulge Bo Peep fantasies, conducting orgies and commanding the violence as if it were the last decadent days of Louis XVI's court. These sequences feel bolted on because the frameworks of psychic revolt and the sociological space of Modernism were conceived completely differently in 1975. There's an exhilarating fusion of the historical perspectives in Wheatley's hallucinatory vision, at times literally fracturing screen-space into free-wheeling, non-narrative, kaleidoscopic frenzies. Wheatley's interest in embedding horror and science fiction in both cinematic and English historical frames has been evident from the beginning (and is at its strongest in *A Field in England*), but it is

worth holding apart the distinct frames of 1975 and 2015 before watching them crash together so exuberantly in Wheatley's film.

(2960 words)

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NOTES

- ¹ J. G. Ballard, 'Two Letters', *Foundation* 10 (1976), 50-2 (p. 51).
- ² Le Corbusier, *Towards a New Architecture* (BN Publishing, 2008), 58 and 61.
- ³ Le Corbusier, 'Inaugural Speech', in Arthur Rüegg, *La Cellule Le Corbusier: L'Unité d'Habitation de Marseille* (Marseille: Editions Imbernon, 2013), 100-02 (pp. 101 and 100).
- ⁴ See Nigel Warburton, *Ernö Goldfinger: The Life of an Architect* (London: Routledge, 2004).
- ⁵ J. G. Ballard, *High Rise Synopsis*, J. G. Ballard Papers, British Library (Add Ms 88938/3/10/1), 2.
- ⁶ Oscar Newman, *Defensible Space: People and Design in the Violent City* (London: Architectural Press, 1972), 27.
- ⁷ James Dunnett, 'A Terrible Beauty...' in *Ernö Goldfinger: Works 1*, compiled James Dunnett and Gavin Stamp (London: Architectural Association, 1983), 7.
- ⁸ Conrad Jameson, 'Architects' Error', *New Society* (8 May 1975), 351-3 (p. 351).
- ⁹ Yamasaki, cited in James T. Patterson, *Grand Expectations: The United States 1945-79* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 336.
- ¹⁰ Charles Jencks, *The Language of Post-Modern Architecture* (London: Academy Editions, 1977). For a critique of the reductive and often inaccurate accounts of the estate, see Katharine G. Bristol, 'The Pruitt-Igoe Myth', *Journal of Architectural Education* 44:3 (1991), 163-71.
- ¹¹ Goldfinger, 'The Sensation of Space' (1941), reprinted in *Works 1*, 47-50 (pp. 47-8).
- ¹² Newman, *Defensible Space*, 207.
- ¹³ Full text of J. G. Ballard's 1966 essay on Surrealism, 'The Coming of the Unconscious', is available online at http://www.jgballard.ca/non-fiction/jgb_reviews_surrealism.html. Roger Caillois, 'Mimicry and Legendary Psychasthenia' (1934), trans. John Shepley, *October* 31 (1984), 17-32 (p. 28).
- ¹⁴ David Cooper, *The Grammar of Living: An Examination of Political Acts* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1976), 3.
- ¹⁵ J. G. Ballard, *High-Rise* (London: 4th Estate, 2014), 152.
- ¹⁶ Patrick Collison, 'Come See London's Latest Luxury Housing Development', *The Guardian* (22 July 2015). Available online at: <http://www.theguardian.com/society/2015/jul/22/come-see-londons-latest-luxury-housing-venture-where-a-car-space-is-50000>
- ¹⁷ See Alan Powers (ed.), *Robin Hood Gardens Re-Visions* (London: Twentieth Century Society, 2010). For report on failed listing, see *Dezeen Magazine* (5 August 2015), available online at: <http://www.dezeen.com/2015/08/05/politician-calls-immediate-demolition-robin-hood-gardens-listing-bid-fails-historic-england-brutalism/>
- ¹⁸ Jason Wood, 'High-Rise' (interview with Wheatley), *BFI Film Makers*, 3 (2015), 16-18 (p. 16).