

# The Rise and Fall of the Towers

*Keynote paper to one-day symposium on high rise housing,  
North-East London Polytechnic Department of Architecture, 24th May 1979, 10.00 am*

**John McKean**

---

At a quarter to six, in the early light of Tuesday 16th May, eleven years ago almost to the day, Ivy Hodge got up, went into her kitchen and put on the gas for her early morning cup of tea. The rest, as they say, is history. As we know, it failed to ignite immediately; for unknown to her there was a faulty connection to the cooker. The build-up of gas exploded, and the blast blew out the load-bearing external wall of her kitchen at Flat 90, on the 18th floor of her housing block in Canning Town.

The floor above therefore collapsed and this weight, and then the impact of these walls and floors onto those below, caused the progressive collapse of the rooms in this corner of the block right down to the ground eighteen floors below. The lasting image in that evening's and the next morning's papers is seared in the memory of all who have been involved in multi-storey housing, whether as occupants, managers or designers.

At the end of last week, in fact precisely eleven years later, I received a letter from solicitors in Lincoln's Inn, reminding me that the London Borough of Newham is currently seeking damages in the Royal Courts of Justice, in Court 9, before Mr. Justice O'Conner, against their client, Taylor-Woodrow-Anglian Ltd., as a result of this "partial collapse." "We trust that we have said enough in this letter to indicate the reason for our giving you notice that matters relating to the design and behaviour of Ronan Point and its related tower blocks are sub judice and that any comment or discussion which might take place at or as a result of the proposed seminar which could affect the matters now before the court should not be allowed to occur."

Perhaps, then, we will say no more about it today; but we cannot forget its catalytic effect, that shocking early morning news in 1968 which galvanised all sorts of varied attacks on high-rise living. As E. W. Cooney has said, in a paper which seems to me the best brief history of British high-rise<sup>1</sup>, "The disaster of Ronan Point and its repercussions could not be overlooked in any plausible account of events."

---

<sup>1</sup> E W Cooney, "High Flats in Local Authority Housing in England and Wales since 1945", in A Sutcliffe (ed.) *Multi-Storey Living*, London, 1974

see also Robert McCatcheon, "High Flats in Britain 1945-1971", in 'Political Economy and the Housing Question', *Political Economy of Housing Workshop*, 1975

We can leave it just with two resulting anecdotes: First, there was rushed through the so-called 'Ronan Point' wind-loading amendment to the Building Regulations, although wind, of course, was "probably" not a source of trouble at Ronan Point itself.

Second, there was the subsequent country-wide installation of electric heating to replace the potentially explosive gas in high flats. Soon tenants only too often found themselves unable to afford to use the electric heating provided, often installing paraffin heaters, creating a gallon of water vapour for each of paraffin (or whatever the figure is), and then looking in frustrated rage at the slimy or mouldy growths on their bedroom ceiling. This comes full circle in another way with the enquiry in 1977 into structural and fire safety at Hunslet Grange, Leeds, under the threat of a gas explosion. For many of the 1250 households there used Calor gas, as electricity was too expensive and the building, designed for heating by electricity, had not - it was said - been designed to withstand gas shock!

\* \* \* \* \*

I would like today, in this exploratory seminar, to see if we can loosen our ideological shackles where possible; to look at high-rise flats as buildings, to be willing to admit, as Kenneth Campbell (who unfortunately has had to pull out of attending today) says, "there might be some [which] are very bad, a great number are quite ordinary and some very good indeed"<sup>2</sup>; and to look at their patterns of possible occupancy, their potential for rehabilitation, addition to, or even their demolition, with open minds and to avoid jumping to the easiest short-term solutions. First, before our invited guests have a chance to get a word in, I'd like to sketch an historical context, and to suggest a few questions for today.

\* \* \* \* \*

It is worth remembering that, although articulate outcry was still to come, the high-rise boom itself was already over when Ronan Point "partially" collapsed. The government subsidies had been altered to put paid to the really high, and few architects even then were daring to defend point blocks as a general solution.

Its official popularity is reflected in the Department of the Environment's "Good Design in Housing" awards. By 1967 almost all awards were for low-rise schemes; in 1968 10 of 14 winners had pitched roofs, and of the commended 26, 21 were low-rise, three high and two mixed.

---

<sup>2</sup> *Building Design*, 28.7.1987, p2.

Here are the figures for tenders - as percentage of total dwellings - from the 1950s to the early 1970s. (*Tenders approved for Local Authority housing in England and Wales.*)

	5 - 14 storeys (A) %	15 and over (B) %	A + B % (all over 4 stories)	number of dwellings
1953 - 1959	6.4	0.5	6.9	971,678 (138,811 p.a.)
1960 - 1964	12.3	7.0	19.3	595,403 (119,081 p.a.)
1965	10.9	10.6	21.5	162,540
1966	15.3	10.4	25.7	172,577
1967	13.3	9.7	23.0	170,545
1968	14.0	5.9	19.1	154,308
1969	9.7	3.8	13.5	112,201
1970	8.0	1.8	9.8	98,080

(Source: *DOE Housing Statics, No 24, February 1973 HMSO, 1973; based on tables 10 and 12, pp 24-5*)

There are two other statistical points of which we should be conscious throughout.

First, the scale of the high-rise phenomenon. Between 1911 and 1974, the percentage of British housing stock made up of flats rose from 3% to 10%; only to 10%. And 'flats', of course, are not by any means necessarily high. In Scottish cities (included in that percentage) the proportion must be much higher. In Glasgow (where I was born and lived my early years in a tenement flat) I would guess (wildly, perhaps) that the 1911 starting figure is nearer 75 % or 80% and it will not have come down since.

On the other hand, we must not forget that by the early 1970s (the latest statistics I have to hand) it still meant over a million of us were living in blocks of over six storeys, over half a million of us were living in blocks of ten or more storeys. It means, for example, that three thousand Londoners between the ages of one and five, at that most inquisitive and exploratory of all ages, when they are working through those first informal and casual contacts with others, are isolated in GLC flats off the ground (1972 figure). When the new ILEA Evelyn Lowe Primary School opened, over half of the children entering the nursery class at around three and a half years old had never played on the ground.

Second, the other point about statistics follows from that. It is all very well for historians or architects to point, perhaps smugly, to trends; it was said to me recently by an experienced ex-high-rise architect that, "oh high rise? That's a '50s idea." And, as I myself said a moment ago, it was already declining even in building statistics by the time of Ronan Point's failure. But the reality is that towers were still going up in large numbers. Although there were already over 6,000 blocks in the UK over 20 storeys high in 1966, yet in each of the next two years the increase in the number of such blocks

was greater than in any other years. Indeed, the flow has only just stopped, if indeed it is yet finally halted. Perhaps, I don't know, there are still towers rising, the result of the juggernaut which took so long to halt; and perhaps that negative image I've just used is partial anyway. Perhaps, with the social organisation more sensitively organised, towers will continue to rise happily.

Whatever, we already have quite a legacy - five hundred towers in Birmingham, countless numbers in Glasgow, over a hundred in Tower Hamlets alone, including one which - according to the papers a week or two ago - has just been completed, a fourteen storey block, to the design of one of today's guests, Mr Erno Goldfinger.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Sir, I live with my wife in a GLC tower block. This is situated at the intersection of two motorways: the Westway and the M41. Directly below us an overground Metropolitan line crosses two busy British Rail lines (goods and passenger).

The noise is sickening. We live day and night with the unceasing thunder of motor vehicles flat out passing up and down the several slipways, and with the racket of passing trains (goods trains shunt through the night). All this noise hits our home directly.

It is impossible to read, think or listen to music. The tension generated by the noise makes us alternatively irritable and lethargic. We sleep fitfully and wake with a huge din of traffic in our heads. Our air is contaminated by fumes and lead.

These conditions are the result of GLC planning. Our block, which is similar to many others in this area, was consciously planned and built with foreseeable results: specified, that is, as unthinkable in any sane or humane sense of the word.

The planners have systematically denied us our most intimate and rewarding pleasures: peace of mind, study and reflection, the enjoyment of our home and leisure.

What can this constant assault upon mental and physical wellbeing be doing to children? As responsible people we could not consider having children here, but the GLC places families with very young children in these places. What kind of fantasies, moods and relationships can an environment like this nurture in a child?

I must confess that the vandalism which is slowly eating away this particular estate elates rather than horrifies us. How else does one react? The GLC is deaf to transfer requests and there are no effective ways of protest or redress. If to destroy these places is some sort of crime, to have built them is worse. All around us are squatters living in "derelict" (GLC owned) property. Built by speculators at the turn of the century, these houses are shielded from, road and rail lines, are solidly built on a human scale and have gardens. We would gladly rent one. But they are shortly to be demolished.

The GLC is still building unsheltered dwellings all along the Westway. With millions of pounds worth of expertise and materials, it is disseminating the suffering and environmental poverty I have described: factory farms for psychosis and barbarity."

Now that was a letter which appeared in *The Times* on 20th November last year, shortly before that paper disappeared from the streets. *The Evening Standard* took up the story the next day and published a rather less articulate, but wider, view of the

specific case. It is an accurate, and horrifying indictment of what we have been up to.

But of what, precisely? In *The Times*, the letter was headed "Living in a tower block." *The Standard* headline the following day was "Despair of the skysrise children". If the problems had been "low" - and almost all of them here could as easily have been - would that headline have read: "Living in a semi" or "Living in a terrace", rather than, perhaps, more pertinently, naming the real problem with the headline "Living next to motorways and polluted wasteland in an inner-city desert"?

So the image of the tower block is central to all discussion on the subject.

Which reminds me of the ad for this seminar in last week's *Building Design*, which the paper had chosen to illustrate with a Hugh Ferriss drawing. Ferriss, in the book from which they took that evocative sketch, *The Metropolis of Tomorrow*, wrote of one tower, typically: "In its forthright structural simplicity, its scale, and its power, it definitely announces the new order." But then he thoughtfully added: "Yet if we relinquish the picturesque to assume the more critical viewpoint, do we not begin to apprehend in this headlong ascent, something ominous? It is not a little disturbingly reminiscent of the Tower of Babel?"<sup>3</sup>

That was in 1929. Ferriss is a fascinating, but sometimes erratic, barometer of feeling at the time. This next comment of his is perhaps more typical of the general mood: "Our criterion for judging this self-conscious Architecture" (he was talking about tower blocks for both living and working) "will be its effect on human values; its net contribution to the harmonious development of man. We hope that eventually it will not only adequately meet the demands of our physical welfare, but will also serve in actualizing whatever may be man's potentialities of emotion and mental well-being."

This image was potent. I don't want to recite a history of tall housing to you (although there is no very good one in print), but I do want you to realise how strong, and hence important, these images were - and indeed are. From the 19<sup>th</sup> Century through half of this century, we see positive, often idealistic images, releasing human potential to a fuller life, in cleaner, humane surroundings... and in recent years, we see the other images - of imprisonment and horror, of restricting human behaviour in squalid, blighted surroundings.

"The British are traditionally anti-urban." At least that's how the sociologists put it to architecture students here at NELP, and to them this is a root cause of dissatisfaction with high-rise. Even restricting it to the English (as clearly the urban Scot is rather

---

<sup>3</sup> Hugh Ferriss, *The Metropolis of Tomorrow*, 1929, p.62

different), the argument is not too difficult to counter. It is more interesting, however, to look at its reflection. The wide intellectual current in the middle third of the century which abhorred the low-density suburbia is perhaps seen at its clearest in the writing of Siegfried Giedion, whose *Space, Time and Architecture* was bible to a generation of Modernist architects and urbanists in the western world.

Even more interesting for us in England, are books like Thomas Sharp's *Town Planning*, published in 1940 by the radical young firm of Penguin, in its quasi-educational blue imprint as Pelican No 66. Clear, coherent forms were called for; the terraces of Bath and Edinburgh were eulogised; a sharp distinction between town and country, between building and landscape; and a communality.

Giedion actually said that the single house was an irrelevant question; it was *housing* which reflected the social needs and aspirations; adding that "everything depends on the unified organisation of life"<sup>4</sup>. Sharp illustrated an imaginary high-rise block in its park: the country manor for the era of the common man. From the grasping individualism to the social advantages of the common weal, showing how the whole can afford more than the sum of its fragmented parts - thus social attitudes and notions of urban form blended richly together at that moment. After the degenerate, immoral inter-war decades of petit-bourgeois semis, at last a real change to sanity. New healthy life for all in "great blocks of flats in their communal parks in the inner residential rings of our cities"<sup>5</sup> will be our reward in the new, post-war social order to come.

A decade later, Alison and Peter Smithson, in *Urban Restructuring*<sup>6</sup>, articulated the prevailing notions from Sharp's era with yet a stronger load of Le Corbusier and European ideas. Yet another decade later, in more garbled and more extreme form, Wilfred Burns (then Newcastle's chief planner, and still today the government's chief planner) crystallized these notions at a harsh extreme in *New Towns for Old*<sup>7</sup>.

Look at the titles of these three texts. TOWN PLANNING is the new dream; URBAN RESTRUCTURING takes it even further; finally NEW TOWNS FOR OLD reaches the neophiliac (and amnesiac) limit!

The argument went that the English had liked towns up to the Regency; but when Victoria came to the throne our culture collapsed, ultimately leading to the ruin of both town and country by the suburbs. (There is a real Osbert Lancaster caricature quality to their history.) "Future generations will find it hard to visualise the motive forces that sent masses traipsing out into the suburbs..." said the Smithsons with genuine disbelief in 1952<sup>8</sup>; Burns told us of "the most dire monotony of modern semis"

---

<sup>4</sup> Siegfried Giedion, *Space, Time and Architecture*, p25

<sup>5</sup> *ibid*

<sup>6</sup> Peter & Alison Smithson, 1952-3 text, published later in their book *Ordinariness and Light*

<sup>7</sup> Wilfred Burns, *New Towns for Old*, 1963

<sup>8</sup> Peter & Alison Smithson, as 6, published in *Ordinariness & Light*, p31.

as if this were an issue of public health, a dreadful disease the only cure for which is ultimately total defoliation to let a new verdant horticulture grow correct and fresh.

And we all know more or less what happened. Before leaving the past, let's remember, in this new era when government housing policy is no longer based on "how many homes can we build?" but on "how many already built homes can we profitably sell off?", remember that despite this amazing boom - and it was amazing - from the late '50s to the early '70s, 40% of all housing in Greater London even today has been there since before the First World War. (1978 figure).

\* \* \* \* \*

And so the boom happened.

- For reasons more or less honest - linked with the welfare state, the right to a decent home, reaction to pre-war squalor.
- For reasons more or less sloppy and fallacious - like the land-use and density excuses which were never rigorously worked out, the sentimental link between quality and industrial process ("scientific method", they said, was employed at Roehampton, with its first use of tower crane and storey height concrete shuttering for housing).
- For reasons more or less crooked - like the uncontrolled proliferation of commercial systems and package deal contracts; where government subsidies for building higher were cheered on by large building businesses close to circles of Tory power; where often, even if the technology may not have been ill-considered, the humane architecture almost certainly was.

"Were all those people (the "respected professionals, the governments, mayors and dignitaries") misguided, corrupt or evil? This is an unlikely thesis!" With these words, Kenneth Campbell, long-time LCC and then GLC chief housing architect, dismissed this suggestion, assuming not only its unlikelihood but its impossibility. It may be "unlikely" (which is why I find the phenomenon interesting, just as why we are fascinated by the sky-diving of lemmings) - but it is certainly worth looking at. Not necessarily the "evil", or even the "corruption", although that may be illuminating. For that is too easy; there are such people everywhere. But the "misguidedness"? Well, yes. I suspect that this was virtually universal. And that architects, planners, housing managers, and all the rest of "us" who were in the business of providing housing for "them", have no or very little excuse.

For example, it is not good enough to blame the architects - who immediately remind you that in 1954 LCC sociologists said that everyone loved high flats. (And the RIBA had an enthusiastic symposium on them in the following year.)

There was lots of documentation about the whole issue for those who had eyes to see. From the condemnation of total blitzkrieg as proposed by such as Burns, (there were papers like Mark Fried's classic essay "Grieving for a Lost Home") to the detailed issues of living in high flats. "Very many comments have been made as to the undesirability

of bringing up children in flats and general regrets are expressed that this should occur at all." That was said in a government publication a quarter of a century ago.<sup>9</sup>

Cedric Price typifies many architects' views in his comment: "Ruth Glass's work on kinship patterns in East London after the war (with Peter Wilmott) justified the most monstrous buildings." Is that really so? Did architects really have this biblical faith (and academic understanding too), as well as this inability to trust their own perceptions?

Kenneth Campbell, the GLC long-time chief housing architect, told me recently (when we were discussing Chris Booker's TV spectacular on *The Failure of Modern Architecture*) that it took him years to realise that housing managers were putting families with small children in buildings his department had designed for teenagers and adults. He wrote last year that the high-rise housing programme had failed for three reasons. First, there was this wrong occupation "forced by continuing gross housing shortage". Second, "under the pressure of such a large programme", caretaking and maintenance broke down. Third, the cost limits forced them to install "totally inadequate" lifts.<sup>10</sup>

"The only excuse for our ignorance," he continued, "is that right up to the end, both the social research people in County Hall and the DOE produced surveys of tenant reaction which can only be described as inexplicably optimistic."

Well, really, how much of this can we believe? At least we can learn to be wary of the "social research people", I suppose.

At the same time, it has taken the managers and politicians even longer to accept any public measure of responsibility at all. George Tremlett's well-known tirade last summer, in his role as GLC housing chief, against "architects' high-rise 'deadly hand' falling across London in the '60s.." admitted nothing beyond his own insensitive ignorance. The sad thing is that his perception of the resulting environment was absolutely right, despite his myopia about responsibility. At least his Housing Controller, Harry Simpson, was more cautiously open when, a few months later, he said that "our architect colleagues are being used as whipping boys ... but we are all guilty and more chief housing officers should admit it."<sup>11</sup>

Even the economic base was wearing thin long ago - if anyone were interested to see. Building high flats had to be bolstered by favourable subsidy, since as early as 1961 - for example by Peter Stone in the *Journal of the Town Planning Institute* - arguments were clearly being put against the economy of high-rise.

---

<sup>9</sup> M. Willis, *Play Areas on Housing Estates*, HMSO, London, 1953

<sup>10</sup> Kenneth Campbell, in *Building Design*, 28.7.78, p2

<sup>11</sup> Harry Simpson, SHAC 1978 Conference, reported in *Building Design*, 8.12.1978

So what solid arguments were left? There was the tower as image.

Throughout history, from the Tower of Babel one might say, the tall block has had a socially important role to play.<sup>12</sup> Towers were designed less for convenience, perhaps, than to answer the need for an adequate public, cultural statement; they were locating landmarks, the architectural effort going into the problems of form, scale, silhouette, and so on. Frank Lloyd Wright, who designed at least one tall tower of flats himself, described the UN Building in New York as "the tombstone of democracy," a criticism which in no way implies that height is the cause of its error, only the image.

But today the public feels menaced and ignored, in a landscape dotted, often randomly, with towers (whether for housing or not) without social cohering purpose, and whose image is perhaps of a threatening take-over by machine-mind.

The notion that public housing should fulfil society's need for monumentality, anyway, is a long jump across the credibility gap. But it is a jump in which housing committees, keen to display their patronising benevolence, have been strongly encouraged, by their professional advisors, and by the intellectuals behind them.

Giedion, as always, put it enthusiastically: "Small standardised houses have been fused into a single unit ... and its monumental impressiveness derives from the fact that the standardised units are added together."<sup>13</sup> One could follow the tortured logic of these social functionalists, from Giedion arguing that the simple and utilitarian was "better" than the bombastic, it "revealed more of the essential spirit"<sup>14</sup>, by building up the simple and utilitarian to be the monument of the age, it becomes a bombastic demonstration of the common; essentially, therefore it has to be both monumental and crude: which in architectural terms must be contradictory.

So in our souls we cannot comprehend the towers.

\* \* \* \* \*

Anyway, the mood changed. The government advisor on housing who, in the mid '60s had come in from Bison, concrete frame high-rise merchants, by the '70s was followed by one seconded from the "Noddy home" builders, Bovis Southern. (Interestingly, the former was a Tory industrialist, the latter a Labour lawyer.)

---

<sup>12</sup> This is interestingly discussed in Isi Metzstein and Andy MacMillan, "Amenity and Aesthetic of Tall Buildings", *IABSE/ISE Conference Report Tall Buildings and People (Session 4)*, 1974  
see also Paul Goldberger, *The Skyscraper* and CARL W CONDIT, *The Rise of the Skyscraper*

<sup>13</sup> Siegfried Giedion, *Space, Time and Architecture*, Harvard University Press, p84

<sup>14</sup> Siegfried Giedion, *Space, Time and Architecture*, Harvard University Press, p28

This reversal of image just touches on one point I hope will be returned to: the question of social change and the role of housing. The change I refer to is seen here as a move from housing development which was 'megastructural': not physically one vast object, but more than the sum of its parts in all sorts of ways from its very obviously marked perimeter to the provision of centralised services which only this scale can economically justify. And a move to the recent housing goal of individual homes on the ground, characterised by a total fragmentation of housing communities into the provision of family units for tiny groups to hide away in.

\* \* \* \* \*

So what are the crucial factors in the acceptability of high-rise?

Obviously, the first area concerns the control which residents hold over their own housing. Fundamentally, the more control one has over the world outside, the less determining is the effect which the physical environment will have over one. The more mature, in terms of structuring one's world and moving purposefully within it, and at the same time the more one is able to control and exert choice (through class, education, ultimately through money) - then the less is the determining power of the physical environment on one.

It is difficult for me to believe that local authorities, having got themselves into a paternalistic strait-jacket over most of a century, are so blinkered that they cannot realise this. Without becoming party-political on the subject, (for there's a real chance that selling council homes in the way that seems currently proposed might make life in some towers even worse) there is no doubt that the occupants' level of personal control is proportional (all other things being equal) to the acceptability of their homes. There is surely no need to reiterate all the 'tenants take over' arguments so well put elsewhere by Colin Ward and others; and the social sanity and simple logic in turning existing towers into self-managing co-operative community housing associations seems unassailable. (I do not mean so-called "management co-ops", who are given all the landlord's work but still pay him the rent!)

It is amazing that clients - occupants - were never mentioned, until their complaints grew to a roar in the past decade. There was, for example, absolutely no mention of choice or occupant control or any of these social factors at the 1968 RIBA Annual Conference on housing, just a decade ago. (Architects were being very avant-garde at that time if they made ironic comments on DIY improvements to semis.)

Alex Henney in last week's *Building Design* made the point: all those involved in the production had one thing in common: "They did not live in tower blocks. The consumers were not involved. Our legacy of tower blocks is the consequence of a producer dominated organisational system, unconstrained by either consumer preference or rational cost disciplines."<sup>15</sup>

---

<sup>15</sup> Alex Henney, *Building Design*, 18 May 1979, p16

The spectacle of an architect taking up residence in one of his blocks for a short time illustrated my argument most clearly. The architect has a sophisticated life-style and image of the world; he has money, motor cars and so on; he has, of course, a permanent dwelling elsewhere to return to after the 'holiday' and, perhaps most important, he has a crucially different perception, conception of the building in question anyway. What can he possibly learn beyond what he would find out on reasonably penetrating surveys during the defects liability period? Perhaps this morning Mr Goldfinger will tell us; and I am willing to be pleasantly surprised.

There is a more subtle point too: and this is perhaps clearest if we look at an example. Yamasaki's award winning housing development at Pruitt-Igoe, St Louis, deserves more careful study than I can give it this morning. Looking at the 1954 drawings and model, you can imagine the charming, civilized life of urbane households here, in their carefully articulated spaces. With the image of like-minded neighbours in my head (and the assumption that it was attractively located), I feel I'd love to live here. And so it was designed; and then lauded by the sentimental imaginations of people who would always have had a choice to move.

The architect left the site, amidst applause from his peers, articulated by the AIA awards committee - and the thirty three eleven-storey blocks became the focus of what Lee Rainwater politely has called "one of the most disorganised public housing communities in the United States."<sup>16</sup> It becomes filled by the authority with lower class tenants - that is their description of unskilled slum dwellers with unstable work histories, who are fearful and threatened by society, living in poverty. This is not "working class" housing; here over 50% of the households are female-headed and on public assistance. All are black.

In many ways what happened is obvious - the subtleties we cannot go into here. But the authority, so rigidified and strained that it dared not face its own role, could do nothing but blame the building. And so it took the only possible action, and gave us those other images as memorable as Ronan Point, dynamiting the whole bad dream - like the end of *Zabriskie Point* - obliterating the memory. And architects seem willing to carry the can. Charles Jencks, with amazing lack of perception, called this moment of demolition the end of modern architecture (in the tone of voice I tried to mimic when I started!).<sup>17</sup>

The demolition was an inevitable part of a closed system: if, for example, they had been given away to young co-operative associations with a grant of half the cost of the dynamite and the spur, say, of some research or media interest - what then would have happened?

---

<sup>16</sup> Lee Rainwater, "Fear and the House-as-haven in the Lower Class", *Journal of the American Institute of Planners* Vol 32, No.1, January 1966

<sup>17</sup> Charles Jencks, the opening words of *The Language of Post-Modern Architecture*, Academy, London, 1977

Even before Pruitt-Igoe was built, some of Britain's architects most enthusiastic about high-rise, were well aware of the problem: "Subsidies make our tackling the problem of the house and the house-group unreal, and the choice of the individual a spurious one. ... There can only be a reality where the individual makes a choice from given and real alternatives," wrote Alison and Peter Smithson in 1952-3.<sup>18</sup>

Tenant control operates in various ways. The ability to choose, to choose to move or stay, is the first factor; and often this come down to a question of money. It's not - at the other extreme - just the barrister or broker with his amazingly high little pad in the Barbican and a country cottage for weekends. It's also the two identical blocks, across the road from one another, one GLC owned, the other a private development by a package dealer, which have totally different levels of occupant satisfaction. This raises the question of personal control outside one's own flat front door, and the ability to pay for this quality to be kept up as one's own - the concierge (whom I hated but was grateful for in my last flat), the hall carpet, the well-lit and clean stair.

So, to leave it, the question of poor housing is first a question of poverty: not one of housing. Housing will not solve social problems, and poverty can very quickly wreck housing...and - this is a touchy one - can it, perhaps, wreck some forms of housing more quickly than others?

\* \* \* \* \*

So the next question is: what are the intrinsic hazards or drawbacks with high-rise, irrespective of socio-economic factors? First, and obviously, novelty. With the assumption that novelty = progress = a desirable goal, no-one questioned the basis of such radical experiment; no-one asked: why not work from what people already knew - knew they liked, knew they disliked.

Novelty brought untested methods, details and systems; methods of fabrication, details of construction, systems of building, contracting and designing. Even more novel - and unrecognised it seems - was the siting: in the sky. We were just not used to, and didn't even accept the significant climatic gradient as height increased. There was a general inability to understand the fierceness of the elements above five storeys. And so the catalogue of failures which today form a widening stream: Bricks and brick slips are spalling and falling - half a million pounds has been spent by Bootle and Birmingham each on one tower over twenty storeys and only half a dozen years old, to remedy the flying bricks<sup>19</sup>. Similar episodes occur round the country: in Brighton, residents of thirteen tower blocks have been told to keep away from the edge of their building in windy weather<sup>20</sup>. Water penetrates the seventeen storey Alpha House in Coventry, built in 1963, at the rate of 500 gallons per rainy day, they

---

<sup>18</sup> Alison & Peter Smithson, 'Urban Restructuring'; published in *Ordinariness and Light*, p.83

<sup>19</sup> reported in *Building Design*, 17 November 1978, p.7

<sup>20</sup> reported in *Building Design*, 26 March 1976

say; window frames need replacing, concrete cladding spalls, whole elevations are rebuilt. All this is on buildings between five and fifteen years old, and these are just examples I've taken without needing to pick and choose, from *Building Design's* "The Frightening cost of failures".<sup>21</sup>

In 1974 - for one last example - the London Borough of Newham began inspecting all 108 of its tower blocks of eight or more storeys. Thirty-two of the first seventy two to be surveyed needed serious remedial work.

And so the new architect's role is either to trouble-shoot on behalf of the housing authority or to act as advocate on behalf of tenants to force the authority into remedial action.

\* \* \* \* \*

In living so closely above and below others, there is an intrinsic helplessness - an issue exemplified in the well-known problems of GLC "no overflow" bathroom fittings and the floods in the development at Thamesmead. And this links, ultimately, to the dependence on central services.

We all, or nearly all, nowadays are linked to national systems of supply and sewerage. But we can, most of us, survive if services are temporarily disrupted. And, if there is a problem say a gas explosion in a neighbour's kitchen - we are unlikely to feel the repercussion. On the other hand, the megastructure resident's reliance on central services is almost a life-support system: and indeed, only too often, the lifts are continually out of order. It is no unusual occurrence.

My own experience is of living on 10<sup>th</sup> floor, with the lifts continually malfunctioning through consistent (and inevitable) overloading, in a new tower (at Essex University in Colchester). The landlord's response was to coat the interior of the lifts with sharp, spiky graffiti-proof 'paint', rather than to provide adequate vertical movement in the tower.

"The lift breaks down every other day. ... I don't know the name of the others on my floor..." This Salford housewife interviewed on television recently is more typical than unique. Lifts are always under-financed, and the ease of isolation which one has to fight against with tall block design is simply encouraged. "I know six or eight families by name.." said one high-rise tenant from Liverpool 8 on the same TV programme. This was a bitter complaint.

---

<sup>21</sup> *Building Design* special feature, 26 March 1976

Well, I don't even know that many in my terraced street where I've been two years; but it's no threat. I have a front garden, a hedge and a fence; a front porch on which I can sit in the morning sun, safe and semi-private from which I can venture to bridge that gap if I want. When one hasn't this in-between space, then the frustration mounts immediately.

As soon as you leave the public level of free movement (and that needn't be the "ground"), all the mechanical services take on real importance; and just the possibility of their absence - like fear of power failure - can become a nagging threat, or at least an anxiety just below the level of consciousness, to be manifest in an increased tendency to depression. At the same time, the possibility for haphazard, random encounter and play - which is so crucial for our children but also (we less often admit) for the rest of us too - is cut off.

Teachers in Scotland, in a recent report, identify high-rise children as "incurious, quiet and short on general information." Other studies confirm the obvious: the isolation of tower living means a lack of vital stimulation. Limited research also shows that the younger the child and the poorer the parents (as you would expect), the more the family unit in high-rise accommodation faces danger - and the more it needs every possible support from the social and physical framework of housing. Do high-rise blocks provide the kind of supportive environment we all need, but which the disadvantaged need the most particularly and urgently? Do they, at the least, offer the richness of the old town streets?

\* \* \* \* \*

There was much myth about 'streets in the air', and there is no time for me to chase that image here. Some designers even called lift shafts 'vertical streets' in all seriousness, and utter lunacy. It sounded great in 1952: "Decks would be places not corridors or balconies; thoroughfares where there are 'shops', post boxes, telephone kiosks... the flat block disappears and vertical living becomes a reality... The refuse chute takes the place of the village pump." If you have stood by a refuse chute at Robin Hood Gardens, which the Smithsons built in Tower Hamlets fifteen years after writing that, you will realise that their enthusiasm carried them to the point of absurdity. But it was a fertile image - and even then, in 1952, they were realising that the weakest link in the social chain was the lift. But they couldn't suggest anything better.

So does the experience of bad high-rise mean high-rise is necessarily bad? "It is not beyond human ability to distinguish between good, bad and indifferent in contemporary architecture, and this applies to high rise buildings," says Kenneth Campbell<sup>22</sup>.

---

<sup>22</sup> Kenneth Campbell, *Building Design*, 28.7.1978, p.2

see also Kenneth Campbell "Housing Since the War; Changes in Design and Expectations", *Housing Review*, November/December 1974, p.157; Kenneth Campbell, 'The Rise and Fall of the High Block', *Estates Gazette*, 7 October 1978, reprinted a week or two ago (interestingly retitled 'The Fall and Rise of the Towers') *Building Design*, 5, 1979

I like Brecht's aphorism: "When planned towns are hideous, they are so not because they are built according to plans, but because they are built according to hideous plans." Now, having outlined some intrinsic qualities of high buildings, can we say: when high-rise is intolerable, it is not so because it is high-rise but because the design for, and the regulation of, their inhabitation is intolerable?

I believe we can.

Of course towers as we have tended to know them, even when they were in working order, have been intolerable for all sorts of disadvantaged people - from the very young, to the small school-kid carrying a stick to reach the lift button, to the lonely, the aged, the pregnant, and so on. Of course towers as we have known them increase isolation and reduce social interaction. We all hear the tales of people dying in tower flats and the bodies being noticed months later. We saw in the press that "in one block built in Knowsley in 1971, every second flat has seen an attempted suicide."<sup>23</sup>

"She can't change her environment but you can change her mood with Serenid-D." This headline, noticed by Sheila Robotham in *The Practitioner* over a picture of a young mother with pram in front of a block of flats,<sup>24</sup> intimates the horrors we are willing to encourage to save facing up to the real problem. But how much of this is caused by height, and how much could be improved by decent architecture?

What about the good blocks? Patrick Hodgkinson's mini-Corbusian Unités at Loughborough Park, which always seem gleaming in their neat landscape, are, along with Powell & Moya's Churchill Gardens in Pimlico, said to be among the best loved council housing in London<sup>25</sup>. Each scheme was designed by fine architects with strong vision.

"The most successful high-rise ever," is how Hans Scharoun's biographer Peter Blundell Jones described to me that architect's twin blocks in Germany, towers which - importantly - are named "Romeo" and "Juliet". (With no disregard to Councillor Harry Ronan, try that one in Canning Town, I say!) It has implications about the images held both by designer and occupants. And the design idea here also gives a clue: it is seen as an assembly of flats, not as a tower divided into flats, and perhaps somehow that is perceived by the inhabitants. There is identity for the part and for the whole together. Certainly these Scharoun-designed towers are of owner-occupied apartments, and they remain very popular.

Similarly tenanted is Ricardo Bofill's "Walden Seven" outside Barcelona. When, for polemical purposes, I called this "a high-rise slum" to NELP students who visited it last

---

<sup>23</sup> *One in Eight*, Merseyside Council for Voluntary Service, Liverpool.

<sup>24</sup> Sheila Robotham, *Woman's Consciousness, Man's World*, p75

<sup>25</sup> Information from Colin Ward in conversation

year, there was uproar for it had been a site of pilgrimage. But it has appallingly cramped spaces; few lifts; dark, narrow, access balconies; there is often so little daylight that deep in the megastructure you see balconies coated in mirror to reflect some light inwards. Now, even though the external tiling is falling off, this clean, well-policed, block is highly popular, it is an unmistakable landmark, and the flats, obtainable only at a premium, change hands at vastly inflated prices.

Closer to home, physically and socially, and designed by an architect who has been linked to an "organic" tradition as have Bofill and Scharoun, is Ralph Erskine's Newcastle high-rise at Byker. Very successfully, this Byker Wall (not 'tower', note), the last of Britain's high high-rise projects, seems able to avoid the stigma we have been discussing.

But despite examples such as these, the bad image is now irremovable. In the *London Evening Standard* last winter there was an important article on the GLC architects' political problems since Tremllett's comments<sup>26</sup>. It was illustrated with a charming picture of trees, children playing in a well-maintained landscape, and a block of pleasant-looking flats behind. The caption read: "Swedenborg Square. Looks good, but frustrating if you live at the top." This bore no relationship to the article which had not mentioned high-rise.

So what is happening?

Much of the well-publicised failures, both material and social, are nothing to do with high-rise. In Knowsley (Merseyside) they decided in July 1976 to demolish 500 three-storey flats; in the infamous Kirby (Barbara Castle's "New Jerusalem"), not only are seven storey blocks standing glassless and bricked up, but the most vandalised are three-storey pitched roof dwellings.<sup>27</sup>

\* \* \* \* \*

So now the towers fail. They fail through tenants voting with their feet - and their arms, and aerosol guns, and bricks, and knives. Pruitt-Igoe is down; Quarry Hill in Leeds is down; and there are weekly threats by one authority or another that demolition is the only answer. Top explosives experts working last year on the demolition of a twenty year old 11-storey block in The Wirral "predicted a flurry of activity from other authorities" interested in their new, cut-price demolition system.<sup>28</sup>

Yet, when Liverpool last year advertised a 99-year lease on The Piggeries - an uninhabitable block only twelve years old, and even though the estimated cost

---

<sup>26</sup> *The Evening Standard*, 9 November 1978

<sup>27</sup> *The Observer*, 11 March 1978

<sup>28</sup> *Building Design*, 14.7.1978, p.4

whether to demolish or to refurbish was around a million pounds, they were flooded with enquiries, including one for turning it into luxury homes.

Tenants, like the author of that letter to *The Times* which I quoted at the start, cry out for demolition as their only escape; and they are only too pleased with a council which decides to demolish - as happened earlier this month when Rochester decided, because of major condensation problems, to demolish Tideway which was built in 1963-4<sup>29</sup>.

The National Building Agency is an organisation which was set up by the minister, Geoffrey Rippon, specifically to speed the high-rise impetus, and which in the 1960s constantly refused to criticise the "subjective" quality of any house building system. Now even an NBA spokesman is quoted, on the subject of 700 high-rise deck-access flats in Glasgow, : "It's probably now quite viable for the council to pull them down rather than repair them."<sup>30</sup> What else can we do with them?

The first suggestion is to change the inhabitation.

"Of course there are lots of people to whom "hotel life", by which is meant the maximum of privacy, anonymity and simplicity of service, is suitable and pleasurable. Perhaps for 40% of the population of big cities: students, single people, childless couples, and grown-up families. Much of our post-war housing effort has gone into providing high-flat buildings very suitable for hotel-type living, but unfortunately they have been provided for the use of families with children. To go on doing this would be ridiculous."

That was said not this year, in 1979, but in 1959, by Peter and Alison Smithson<sup>31</sup>. Twenty years later, with the number of single young Britons (aged 15 to 25) increased from 5.5m in 1951 to 7.7m projected for 1981, this is perhaps beginning to be realised. Those groups listed by the Smithsons are exactly the ones who find it nigh impossible to reach the top of any council waiting list. Traditionally, they have relied on private rental, which has decreased in absolute numbers by a third since 1951, and which nowadays never seem to come on to the market at all. So towers are a saviour - not for their form, but for prospective tenants who find no acceptable alternative offered.

The best known tower for young single people is Goscote House, Leicester, opened in 1973 and which has been the subject of a detailed DOE/HDD study. Twenty-two storeys high, 90% of the residents claim to be "satisfied", says the research published earlier this year<sup>32</sup>. NELP itself, of course, is closely involved in the recently opened nine-storey tower, Elliot Close in Stratford, which is largely occupied by our students in pleasant flats.

---

<sup>29</sup> *Building Design*, 4.5.1979

<sup>30</sup> *Building Design*, 2.3.1979

<sup>31</sup> Alison & Peter Smithson, 'Scatter', *Architectural Design*, April 1959

<sup>32</sup> *Building Design*, 9.2.1979

But it is something quite different when students are put in blocks which families have refused. I gather the GLC currently has plans to do this. Glasgow has done it with a sigh of relief, removing themselves from the responsibility of their Frankenstein's monster - the horrifying Red Road Flats; the highest in Europe for a time, and probably still the nastiest. Designed by Sam Bunton & Associates, LRIBA, only a decade ago, they were quite the most obscenely anti-social living quarters I have ever had the misfortune to look at when I was a student (I watched them go up and then become occupied).

Oscar Newman, that worrying American researcher who always seems at first glance to have humane suggestions for improving the housing environment, had developed one of the strands in his *Defensible Space* into the notion of 'Communities of Interest'<sup>33</sup>. "We are advocating the creating of communities of people segregated by age, income, and similarity of interest," he doesn't mind us knowing. Each in its tower block, locked homogenous behind its steel door and TV surveillance system. It is a horrifying image, a mockery of the word 'community'. I am worried that we might be taking the first steps down this too easy road.

What else can be done? The social points are obvious: the value of a concierge is enormous (and also, for the benefit of those who believe researchers rather than their own experience, well-documented). Similar is the value of tenant organisation and self-management. The need for a continual flow of funds into maintenance and upkeep, brings us towards the obvious physical points. These include improving and maintaining vertical circulation; improving insulation and mechanical ventilation and, obviously, the prompt repair of failures.

Then come the attempts which are being increasingly made to alter the buildings' form and use. Open balconies are closed off, access balconies are blocked, locked lobbies are provided, and everywhere the cry is that entry-phones will save the day. A GLC facelift scheme which began last year in Tower Hamlets, and was claimed as "a blueprint for other towers all over London"<sup>34</sup>, involved telephone entry system, extra doors, carpeted landings, better lighting, refuse collection and landscaping.

Simplistic "Oscar Newman" theories are aired; indeed Manchester borough architect even put it in the mouths of his tenants: "tenants complained of the lack of what Oscar Newman called 'Defensible Space'," said he. And so, with that fifteen-year old estate, his solution was to paint the stair, seal off the deck access, and so on.

---

<sup>33</sup> Oscar Newman, 'Communities of Interest', paper in *Architecture, Planning and Urban Crime*, conference report published by NACRO (with RIBA and RTPI), 1975

<sup>34</sup> *Building Design*, 26.6.1978, p.3

The Unité notion, as its name implies, was a little city in itself, a convivial community with all its services (at least in theory). This has gone. Quarry Hill and the others much more modern than it have come down, sometimes for very valid constructional reasons. But they have not been replaced, as an idea, by "social housing" in any sense at all. Rather today the ideal is tacky-tacky, gerry-built little boxes; the caricature of the private consumer market.

We seem to have veered very suddenly from the totally public to the totally private, the neurotically and defensively private: more doors and peep-holes and entry-phones behind which to hide from the threatening world outside. As Martin Pawley has said, when bemoaning the demise of restaurants, corner shops, cafes and clubs in our smaller towns, we now use - indeed are forced to use our homes for living in, no longer for staying in.<sup>35</sup>

We have given up all that gain which a larger scale in housing development offered; as Maxwell Fry so enthusiastically demonstrated, in the film about his Kensal Rise estate, as he took us round the crèche, games room, laundry, workshop and so on. Now it is all 'noddy houses', very low and very pitched roofs, very small and very private gardens. In densest Southwark urban backlands, we find a knotty little cul-de-sac from a Spanish village, under garish red concrete tiles.

Neither of these extremes strikes me as conducive to good housing. For that would demand a carefully designed hierarchy of usable spaces, from the most private to that shared with all the town. We need a middle way, and I see no intrinsic reason why this should not be achieved with dwellings off the ground.

But we must beware the easy route, and the easily mis-read behaviour. Pearl Jephcott, who studied Glasgow's Red Road flats which I mentioned just now, carefully showed how popular they were with the tenants<sup>36</sup>. Now, a few years later, they are said to be uninhabitable. Do not be misled by immediate enthusiasm.

"Tomorrow's World" was the theme for last year's Royal National Eisteddfod for Wales' photographic competition. The winning photograph was an image of these same Red Road flats, lit by security searchlights at night. That's an ambiguous image. Tomorrow was news yesterday. Now, what about trying to live in today's world.

---

John McKean 24 May 1979

Keynote paper to High-rise housing symposium

---

<sup>35</sup> Martin Pawley, *The Private Future*, Thames and Hudson, 1973

<sup>36</sup> Pearl Jephcott, *Homes in High Flats*, Edinburgh, 1971