

High Optimism

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This article addresses the following point of contention: “In 40 years, the average person will live closer to her neighbors and farther from the ground than she does today.”

Who is the *average* person? What is *closeness*? Where is *the ground*?

These questions are not rhetorical; they address the multiple paradoxes of our contemporary cities. Demographics of *majority* and *average* in the United States continue to evolve, challenging the paradigm of middle-class America that has been in place since the mid-20th century. The idea of *proximity* has been compromised and radically altered through social media; and the very notion of *ground* is a concept made precarious by advances in vertical agriculture, sky gardens, and elevated transit.

We are variously engaged in the political, the social, and the ecological; thus the response to the above provocation is tempered by tints in our own metaphorical glasses. At the time of this writing, I had recently moved from a relatively old 3rd-floor walk-up in an intimate San Francisco neighborhood to the 17th floor of a relatively new apartment building in Oakland. My “garden” is one elevator stop down on the 16th floor, complete with lawn, picnic tables, and thermal bath. My closest neighbor sleeps with her head only a wall-thickness away from mine, an intimate distance by any standard, although we have not yet met and I do not know her name. In many ways, I have taken the ground with me, but there are also aspects of terra firma that I am happy to leave behind.

Conventional wisdom often claims that urban dwellers, particularly those in highrise buildings, eschew closeness and choose this residential typology for the anonymity it offers. The stereotype of averted eyes in elevators persists, alongside the reluctance to knock on doors to borrow the proverbial cup of milk. Neighborliness is most often associated with sidewalks and porches, and all the other attendant arguments that have made the “new urbanism” model take hold across the country and, more recently, across the world. Densities and heights that are only possible by elevator ascent can carry with them the promise of an idealized privacy, or even a taint of aggressive territoriality.

The latter is the premise of J.G. Ballard’s novel, *High Rise*, a modern dystopian narrative of architecture’s power to provoke conflict, alienation, and violence. Set in Ballard’s own time near the end of the 20th century, the novel features an architect who finances and designs five identical 40-story towers in London’s Docklands district. The first completed tower, which is the setting of the story, literally embodies a socioeconomic hierarchy. Lower floors are separated from middle ones by a public level, including a supermarket and swimming pool. The top floors are serviced by their own

exclusive executive elevators. Stewardesses, teachers, and secretaries live near the ground level; above them are the minor executives and doctors. The architect, whose name is Royal, lives in rarefied and isolated luxury in the penthouse on the 40th floor.

The novel opens with this line:

As he sat on his balcony eating the dog, Dr. Robert Laing reflected on the unusual events that had taken place within this huge apartment building during the previous 3 months (Ballard, 1975: 1).

This scene is the endgame in a narrative of social disintegration that parallels the physical disintegration of the building itself. Architect and architecture support and subvert each other, reflecting a coded hierarchy of class divisions that eventually (in its stubborn resistance to any fluidity) causes the building and its architect to self-destruct. (The sacrificial dog being consumed by Laing in that opening scene is Royal's Alsatian.) Utilities break down, elevators become garbage dumps, and stairwells are taken over and become sites of mortal combat. The residents wall themselves apart from each other, using furniture to barricade their apartment doors from the inside. In this story, closeness becomes the very engine of aggression, and those who live farthest from the ground are the most willful aggressors. The "Royal" architect has designed a building that arouses primitive survival instincts in its residents; at one point, he leads a hunting party through the interior wilderness. He finally makes his last stand against another tenant (significantly named Wilder) on the penthouse roof. A highly stratified and seemingly ossified architecture has engendered a complete de-evolution, a spatial drama in which tactics of self-preservation unfold on a vertical battlefield.

Ballard's novel is a narrative and negative caricature of a visionary, utopian urbanism that began with French-Swiss architect Le Corbusier's design for the Radiant City (Ville Radieuse) in 1924. For Le Corbusier and other architects of the Congrès Internationaux d'Architecture Moderne, tall towers surrounded by green space held the promise of social equality, and even of universal happiness. After World War II, the architectural concept of the highrise, further fueled by advances in steel construction, crossed the Atlantic to engage two distinct American agendas. In cities across the United States, corporations embraced the skyscraper as the very symbol of their identities, while federal policies in the 1950s and 1960s tested the concept of the Radiant City in large developments of subsidized housing. It was not long before this latter experiment was deemed a disaster; the sanctioned demolition of the 33 Pruitt Igoe towers in St. Louis became a universal symbol of visionary good intentions gone awry. More recently, in newly built cities of Asia and the Middle East, skyscraper housing has become the norm. As we approach the century mark of Le Corbusier's radiant vision, digital technologies are producing new building configurations, and environmental technologies are contributing layers of living walls, sky gardens, and energy generation to ever more radical forms of vertical architecture.

I am an incurable optimist, yet I have no utopian answers for our urban future. Instead, I imagine a continuing saga of resilience to pursue, abandon, reinvent, and resurrect forms of social and ecological relationships, most fundamentally expressed in our forms of dwelling. We currently face a fork in this proverbial road—leading in the opposing directions suggested by this Point of Contention series of articles. Those who will advocate for more distance between dwellings and more connection to the ground are perhaps guided by the desire for continuities between past

and future and an understandable affection for the traditions of townships, neighborhoods, and gardens planted in terra firma behind firmly owned houses. Those of us who argue for encouraging new architectural experiments in height and density, on the other hand, have no ideal images from history in which to plant our vision. Yet to assume a return to the familiar certainties of walkable neighborhoods and corner stores as our only possible future is to suggest that the future can never be different from the past—that, in fact, we are finished with urban inventions and urban dreams.

Several years ago, The History Channel sponsored a competition, inviting eight architects to imagine the city of San Francisco 100 years in the future. My team and I offered a narrative vision of tall *strands* of city, winding along the routes of obsolete roads and freeways, which themselves have been given over to wildlife and agriculture. The strands take the urban ground up with them, supporting an infrastructure of commercial boulevards 20 stories in the air and a density of population that stands in contrast to the wilderness below it. This vision was the result of collaboration among architects, essayists, urbanists, wildlife biologists, and civil engineers who argued for a new kind of city—one open to the contingencies of nature and the imaginings of writers and artists.

We deliberately kept that visual future vague—to emphasize that a time 100 years in the future is certainly ours to imagine—but it is not ours to design, or even to plan. Now, as I look out from my 17th-floor windows, I can squint into a time 40 years ahead, look through the Bay Area fog to beyond those well-worn nostalgias for the front porch and the back garden. Although my apartment faces east, the setting sun is reflected in the façade of another tall building on the adjacent block. Here, even east and west become close, ambiguously joined through accidents of an architecture that was designed to keep nature’s mysteries at bay.

So perhaps our task in looking ahead is to begin to forge policies that will allow us to experience the unexpected and the ephemeral. Such policies may emerge through local voices both in argument and with consensus. To argue for living farther from those macadam streets below requires a leap of faith and an agreement to forego clear pictures in favor of blurry speculations.

Acknowledgments

The discussion of Ballard’s novel *High Rise* appears in a different form in the author’s book *Toward a Minor Architecture* (Stoner, 2012).

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References

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