

HOW TO LIVE IN A TOWER BLOCK

An insider's guide to tower block living

The rise and fall of the Tower Block...

The tower block has been the backdrop to my life, from shiny new vision of the future, all optimism and promise with house proud neighbours and pristine lifts, via bohemian, anarchic student years William Kent Crescent, playground of punks, artists and musicians, 'hard to let' prison ships for the bereft, the uncontrollable, the underbelly of society, all bleak, blank eyed, boarded up hopelessness, to my current optimistic tenant-associated vision, complete with caretaker, 'Manchester in bloom' competitions and Xmas tree in the foyer in December.

I moved into the top floor of a brand new tower block when I was 12, one of 9 gleaming white towers set in pristine green fields, and spend 6 blissful years in my turret in the sky, my ziggurat, my own private utopia. I felt elevated from my old terraced neighbours, somehow more urban and futuristic - one day everyone would live like this, like the Jetsons in streets in the sky, with their own sky shuttles and fancy space helmets!

Since then my tower block lifestyle has been a mixed blessing, a microcosm of the British experiment in mass social housing, as the cracks began to appear - quite literally - in Corbusier's dreams. It was hard being a defender of the scourge of the nation and its social ills, a lone, misguided voice in the wilderness, especially as much of the criticism was well founded. The tower block is most definitely NOT the apartment or luxury loft to the thousands of ordinary families dropped in wholesale, then forgotten, cooped up in their new slums in the sky - out of sight, out of mind.

Whilst most people remember events in their life by songs in the charts, I note them by the balcony I was looking out from, the weather as it scuttled by and the vista in the distant horizon. My days are marked by the glare of the sun level with my window, air traffic flight paths leaving long wispy trails, the distant hum of traffic far below; I can sniff out the seasons and the passage of time by the changes in the natural and built horizon...my eye line that of the maligned pigeon, those rats with wings, with whom I confess to feeling a natural affinity... ignored, misunderstood, scavenger and survivor, the uncrowned kings of the urban environment, set apart from their ratty cousins by their ability to soar way into the clouds, to see what's ahead and what's far far away...

The National Sustainable Tower Blocks Initiative (NSTBI), the pressure group dedicated to rescuing the forlorn Tower Block, has called for a National Tower Block Day, to mark the joys of living aloft. As they point out, economically, tower blocks in or near city centres can help improve urban life if some of the accommodation is reserved for employees who keep vital services running - transport, health and welfare; and environmentally, tower blocks have the advantage of leaving a smaller "ecological footprint" than conventional housing. They can be more energy-efficient, and sharing facilities and services - food co-ops, community cafes and growing vegetables - can reduce waste and save residents money. Governments should capitalise on how relevant they are to policies on social inclusion, local democracy and active citizenship.

High on their list of successful tower block communities is Apple Tree Court in Salford. Salford council invested heavily in maintenance, kept vandalism to a minimum with CCTV, formed a residents' management committee, and added many communal facilities, including landscaped gardens.

The tower block strikes back...

I remain shamelessly optimistic and somewhat romantic about the prospects and potential of the tower block.

What to many is a carbuncle, a blot on the horizon, is to me an elegant, ergonomic solution, a beacon enhancing the urban landscape, bestowing grandeur and gravitas to the city, a symbol of modernity; space efficient, the antidote to the guzzler of green fields, the creeping suburbia of the grotesque land-greedy 'executive cul-de-sac'. The tower block is a model for modern inner city living, efficient and well mannered. Corbusier's original dream of 'The Radiant City', decongesting the cityscape, improving circulation and increasing the amount of green space with skyscrapers, vast parks and wide highways, could still be realised.

Sociopolis, the visionary project unveiled recently in Valencia, utilising the tower block, with solar panelling, garden allotments and grey water storage, offers a positive way forward for the unloved tower block, a chance to win back its reputation, to fulfil its pioneering goal of modern inclusive community living that creates a forward thinking model for all sectors and age groups, rather than resign it to the scrapheap as a botched ambition we weren't ready for, or re-clad and revamped as luxury loft apartments, benefiting only the wealthy...lets embrace the high rise and look skyward.

See you on National Tower Block Day!

A rough guide to high rise living...

Rapunzel was no fool - when the lifts break down and you live on the top floor, 180 feet of hair is bloody crucial!!!

Don't watch that rerun of the *Towering Inferno* until you've lived in 2 different tower blocks and been left mouldering in the lift at least once, reduced to eating that piece of old chewing gum for sustenance - the one gathering fluff and fur on the floor ever since you moved in.

Do watch all 13 episodes of the 1969 'Watch with Mother' series, 'Mary, Mungo and Midge' - I think it comes as standard with your key-fob. It's essential viewing for *Toweristas*, offering crucial advice on how to use the lifts, look out of your windows and interact with your new high-rise pets - Mungo the large solemn dog and Midge the perky piccolo-playing mouse.

Always invest in modular furniture; the lifts, corridors and front doors are always a crucial 1cm too narrow for that robin day sofa and ikea king size bed you splashed out on - and once you've hauled it up there, there's no refund for dragging it all back down and slinging it back in the van.

Never open windows in all the rooms at once on floors over the 15th - the vacuum created will make the little known but notorious 'high rise tornado' pluck you out of your chair faster than an alien gets sucked out of the *Nostromo*!!!

Chuck out your chintz - enjoy the clean modernist lines and dispense with those old fashioned curtains...run about starkers like a baby; no-one can see you from your lofty window...

If you live in the city centre, check that window every 18 months or so, in case they've sneakily thrown up a block across the way and you've been flashing unwittingly to your new neighbours!

Always insist on a test drive before committing to high rise living - if you were sick on the Manchester Eye then you're scared of heights and cleaning the windows or enjoying the balcony is likely to be an insurmountable hurdle.

Never live in a flat below the 10th floor - it's missing the whole point and it's no way to win the respect and camaraderie of your fellow *Toweristas*...

Do get a good pair of binoculars for enjoying your new spectacular views...

Don't forget when you've been spying for hours on the people opposite that they are busy doing the same - that flash of light isn't the sun, it's the tell tale glint of your binoculars locking horns...

Always pack an umbrella, a spare pully **and** sunblock - the weather is never quite what it seemed from your balcony once you're down on terra firma...

Never celebrate Guy Fawkes Night and New Years Eve anywhere but your own balcony - the firework displays stretch across the horizon and go on forever. Invite your friends, hand round the sparklers and wait for the awestruck reaction...by next year you'll be employing door monkeys to keep out the gatecrashers!

High rise etiquette or lift matters...

It's considered good manners to hold the lift open for anyone entering the building - even if they look like mass murderers!! (And they invariably do...)

It's compulsory to partake of highly ritualised small talk with the person squashed up next to you during the lift journey...but never ever talk to them in any other situation, that's just plain weird!

Acceptable lift-topics include the weather, the infeasibly small size of the lift, just how slow it got since they installed the new 'improved' version, anything critical / topical about the council...how long is the latest scaffolding going to stay up, the controversial new stairwell colour scheme, problems with the entry system, what that police incident tent is for....

...NB, as well as all of the above, remember to always start with '*what floor do you want..?*' and always end with an uncomfortable silence...

If someone in the lift is travelling to the top floor, the regulation '*oooh - penthouse?!*' comment is mandatory; if you're lucky enough to inhabit the top floor, tough luck, take it on the chin and remember to laugh like you've never heard it before!

(That, by the way, is a *Towerista* in-joke - in a tower block the top floor is most definitely NOT a penthouse - if you have a penthouse, then you live in a luxury loft apartment, and you're reading the wrong guide book...see your concierge for details...)

Toweristas never check themselves or their makeup in the mirrored glass panelling, never wave / moon at the security camera in the top right hand corner, and never ever squeeze that obstinate spot....

www.towerblocks.org.uk
www.sustainingtowers.org
www.3towers.co.uk
www.c20society.org.uk