Why the dark world of *High-Rise* is not so far from reality

By Nick Dunn   23 Mar 2016

The new film adaption of J G Ballard's classic 1975 novel *High-Rise* has been a while coming. Much like the power-cuts that interrupt life in the novel's namesake, various attempts to translate the book for cinema have been erratic, and ultimately failed. But with director Ben Wheatley's effort garnering positive reviews and critical acclaim, perhaps it is useful to reconsider the story's meaning.

High-Rise tells the story of Robert Laing – a middle class doctor who moves into a complex of futuristic, luxury tower blocks just outside of London. The building where Laing lives is designed to provide everything its residents need, from green spaces, to shops and swimming pools.

But there's a darker side to this architectural Utopia. As events unfold, the building seems to exert a malign influence on its occupants and spats over resources escalate into violent conflicts between "enemy floors". In some ways, the tower itself becomes the antagonist, influencing the moods and movements of the other characters as powerfully as any person.
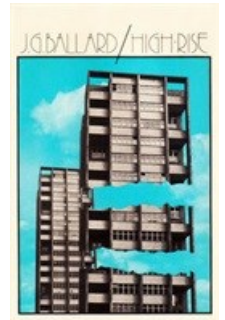
High-Rise, first edition, 1975 Wikimedia Commons

Failed utopias

As Wheatley himself has said, it would be kind of pointless to make a film that has no relevance to modern life. So what message does High-Rise hold for us, in an era when our skylines are becoming more and more congested with towering edifices?

For one thing, the film draws on important lessons from our past. In the naked ambition of *High-Rise's* lead architect, Anthony Royal (Jeremy Irons), we can see traces of Le Corbusier's plans for his Ville Radieuse ("the radiant city"), first presented in 1924. In Le Corbusier's vision, high-density housing was arranged in a Cartesian grid, spread across a huge green area – it was intended to function as a "living machine". It was never built, due to the sheer scale and costs involved.

Demolition of Pruitt Igoe in St. Louis, 1972.

High-Rise also brings into view some of the thinking around tower blocks from the time the novel was written. Following a number of "failed" high-rise projects from the 1960s onward, people began to critique architecture as a form of social engineering, which could influence residents' behaviour in negative ways.

Take, for example, Pruitt Igoe in St Louis in the US: after its completion in the early 1950s, the complex quickly became known for its poor living conditions and crime. Lead architect Minoru Yamasaki lamented: "I never thought people were that destructive." Its demolition in 1972 was labelled by Charles Jencks as "the day modern architecture died".

Even today, politicians in the UK blame the design of "streets in the sky" tower blocks for building in crime – despite evidence to suggest that there were are many other social issues which contribute to these outcomes.

Architecture of inequality

As well as regenerating these historical topics for a modern audience, *High-Rise* also evokes some of the most pressing issues in today's urbanism – in particular, how social inequalities play out in our built environment.

High-Rise portrays architecture as a solidifier of social divisions. In the novel, society is stratified according to wealth, with richer tenants inhabiting the upper levels and less wealthy people toward the base. The residents' physical separation inflames their hostility toward those they see as different from themselves.

Sienna Miller looking down on the masses in High-Rise Studio Canal

But all too often, the reality is far more complex. Take, for example, the recent disputes over upmarket apartment blocks in New York or London, which funnel poorer residents into the building through alternative access routes.

Dubbed "poor doors", these separate entrances prevent residents of different socioeconomic backgrounds from circulating in the same spaces, effectively building in social segregation. But while this practice has been condemned as abhorrent and divisive, it can actually help keep costs down for poorer tenants, because they don't have to contribute to the maintenance of main stairwells and lobbies.

Control, space, delete

If the social tensions portrayed in *High-Rise* are being played out anywhere in our society, it's at ground level – and public spaces are the battlefield.

Corporations and developers are increasingly taking ownership of the public realm. As more gated communities, retail developments and privately owned parks spring up, the questions around who is allowed to come into these spaces and who is not become increasingly pressing.

In his later novel, *Cocaine Nights*, Ballard wrote with troubling prescience about this erasure of public life, and the rise of defensive urbanism:

> " *Townscapes are changing. The open-plan city belongs in the past – no more ramblas, no more pedestrian precincts, no more left banks and Latin quarters. We're moving into the age of security grilles and defensible space. As for living, our surveillance cameras can do that for us. People are locking their doors and switching off their nervous systems.*" "

Public space protection order, Hackney 2015.

This fear of others is perhaps more keenly felt through top-down measures such as public space protection orders. These local government mandates can prohibit certain behaviours in the public realm, such as sleeping rough, begging, or even standing in small groups.

In both examples, we can detect the same fear of "otherness", which the residents of the *High-Rise* feel toward those on different floors.

This is the true power of the film adaptation: Wheatley has expertly reimagined Ballard's futuristic novel in a way that rings true to us now.

Lost futures

That said, we are still some distance from the dense, dystopian settlements of *High-Rise*. But then, any architect can attest that the future never turns out in quite the way we imagine. For example, the Barbican Estate in London – which was perhaps a visual reference for the film – featured "highwalks".

Not so futuristic now.Gürkan Sengün/Wikimedia Commons

These raised, covered walkways were envisaged as the future of pedestrian movement. The architects even designed the highwalk system with connection points, ready for the attachment of new paths. But this version of London never arrived, and today the pathways are simply an eccentricity of the building.

The density and intensity of the *High-Rise* is not yet mirrored by modern society – and it may never be. But this film is a timely warning that the built environment reflects the cultures and values of the society which created it. And what is certain is that the more screens, gates, meshes and separation that we place between ourselves, the more fractured our social relations, and the more we demonise the weak, the poor and the voiceless.

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