

It's What's Inside That Counts

Standing in a well-known generic bookstore awaiting my departure from a well-known UK airport, I laboriously rifle through rows of holiday fiction, slowly feeling that innocent dabble into aesthetic compulsion coming. Time is running out and I decide to choose my next read on the pure superficiality of its cover jacket. Unsurprisingly, all 286 pages of the contained fiction were unabatedly bad. Stuck in another truly awful non-place of supermodernityⁱ, the Blackwall Tunnel approach road, I'm staring up at Balfron Tower and considering the possibility of it playing out an oppositional role to my badly chosen holiday read. Ernö Goldfinger's iconic, infamous and uncompromising architecture is purely experienced by most of us as an exterior. Our subjective decision-making is suspended and assumptions creep in without even thinking (or wanting) to cross the threshold. Goldfinger was adamant that the question of successful architecture could only be answered through considering the whole.ⁱⁱ

In the conservative bourgeois sprawl of the suburbs, what exists beneath the vacuous "good morning" and transparently cheery "hello" lays no more a community than in many other housing spaces. This is not to say that the inner life of Balfron (or its counterparts) represents the reality of a harmonious Utopian dream, far from it, but that community formations can exist on an illusory surface. In an age of ever-heightened social dromologyⁱⁱⁱ, technological communities are at the forefront of contemporary discussion, the growth of social networking websites and so on. And, as recession bites, I wonder if the draw of these virtual spaces grows stronger, where the brutality or mediatised sense of negativity in everyday life can be suspended.

JG Ballard's novel *High Rise* (1975) explored common dystopian themes about the impact of modern technology on the human physic, describing an anarchistic disintegration of a tower block community^{iv}. In Ballard's fictional housing project, the characters descend into a spurious orgy of violence and allow themselves to "just act natural", for those Bataille-esque urges to come forth and free themselves. Yet, despite this physiological release, the tower block becomes a micro-communal, introverted space, their world internalized. As we quietly sit at our technological machines, tapping away to people who could well be living within 30 feet of us, a quieter revolution in the operation of a community is occurring. We become open in a virtual sense yet close ourselves away from physical face-to-face relationships. Le

Corbusier's infamous mantra, "A house is a machine for living in."^v, sees its inverse fruition as machines become the building blocks for experience.

Opening up a space like Balfron, through artistic or other motive, allows an influx of the world outside to combine with a revelation of the interior into a two-way conversation. In a way that a joke can release tension and bring two parties closer together, the connection between the fantasized "inner" of those on the exterior can be placed next to a reality. Communication beyond the binary and logical conclusions of digitisation can be freed into a physical discussion between space, people and artistic activity.

Mark Selby © 2009

www.manifesto-art.co.uk

ⁱ Marc Auge, *Non Places - Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity* (London: Verso, 1995)

ⁱⁱ For more information on Ernő Goldfinger see Nigel Warburton, *Ernő Goldfinger: The Life of An Architect* (London: Routledge, 2003)

ⁱⁱⁱ Dromolgy - A term coined by Paul Virilio meaning that body of knowledge concerned with the phenomena of speed, or more precisely with the way speed determines or limits the manner in which phenomena appear to us. Ian James, *Paul Virilio*. (London: Routledge, 2007), p.29.

^{iv} Roger Sherwood, *Trellick Tower* http://housingprototypes.org/project?File_No=GB010 (2002)

^v Le Corbusier, *Vers une Architecture* (1923)