

## Urban vertigo:

### The pandemic of moving out of equilibrium

vertigo, n.

*Physiology.* sensation of spinning or tilting or that one's surroundings are rotating.

Usually the state produces dizziness, mental bewilderment, and confusion.

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We recognise vertigo as a physical disease: such simple definitions as above direct us to the science of pathology, to the physicality of a medical case (Britannica). But yearning to settle within an expanding urban landscape, we, as a collective, suffer from yet another form of vertigo, for the everyday urban travel, horizontally and vertically, is one traverse too frequent, too far, too fast. The very bearings grounding the crucial understanding of connection, both between architecture and the individual, and between individuals, have unwillingly given way to more mobility. This century's urban city is the new epicentre of "dizziness, mental bewilderment, and confusion." Katherine Shonfield and Julian Williams describe this act of moving upwards a desire; the act of staying high, looking back and down "a desire achieved;" and the act of securing a room at the top a desire satisfied." (29-40) It is as if staying up top is best, seemingly showing that going upwards is the desire, and that desires are to be achieved.

In a sense, this urban vertigo is more prevalent and adverse. In contrast to the current discourse on verticality and volumetric urbanism that looks into architecture and surveying (Graham and Hewitt) or territories and boundaries (Harris), priority is given to the inhabitants instead of the masterplan through the examination of those depicted in *Attack the Block* directed by Joe Cornish and *How Blue Was My Valley* written and illustrated by Yeung Hok Tak. Working with themes of connectivity, utopia, and desire, I attempt to look at

dream/reality and urban verticality with a bottom-up approach to expose urban vertigo as a disease more than mythical, and to represent the full picture of the perception of utopia between architects and governments above and the working class below.

### **A Desire to Move up/to Utopia**

Both *Attack* and *How Blue* centre themselves around the events that happen in a public housing estate: *Attack* takes place in the fictional Wyndham Tower, Clayton Estate in South London; *How Blue* recollects the days in the demolished Lam Tin Estate in Lam Tin, Hong Kong. Setting the discussion on urban life and verticality on the course into the realm of utopia, utopia is only a day's imagination for architects and governments, but a life of turmoil, class (and race) segregation, and disconnect for the working class. Mass towerblocks can be utopias, but while verticality enables those to move *up* to utopia, it is the working-class that has to move *in* and relocate.

Alison Ravetz addresses the utopian roots of council housing and how these utopian housing estates have been realised in practice. She writes that “[t]he ultimate episode of utopianism in British council housing was the brief boom in high-rise housing from 1958 to 1968.” (104) This episode originates from the central and local British government's agents, environmental health professionals, architects, and more, having been inspired by Le Corbusier and his utopian visionary city masterplans (105-06). Their wishes for a greater mass relocation of population fostered the building of more towerblocks in the city and in the suburbs, with a glorified imagination of a modern future: towerblocks seem to be “a quick and trouble-free way of fulfilling everyone's dreams.” (106) Hong Kong, being a crown colony of the UK at that time, must have succeeded this vision and relocated it onto the designs of, among other major constructs built at that time, Lam Tin Estate. But whether this is seen as a success is up for debate, for this opens up the question: who is this “everyone”,

and whose dreams are fulfilled? Ravetz here gives a perfect binary opposition with public housing buildings: the directed dream and the represented reality.

As one of the subtle linkages between public housing and the utopia dream, Reyner Banham saw a strong humanistic element in the Golden Lane Housing (figure 1) and Sheffield University Extension design competition entries (figure 2) by the Smithsons, for the fact that while Modernism in architecture focused on geometry, the Smithsons' New Brutalism focused on topology: circulation and housing units placed human within the design, showing connectivity and communication between occupants. (Banham "The New Brutalism" 27) Both figure 1 and 2 demonstrate the promotion of human circulation within the Brutalist buildings, even when the occupants are not at street-level. The mixed use of concrete, steel, and glass in early Brutalist building shows their appreciation of raw materials and their play on space. Just as the skeleton, activity, and flesh were crucial to human, structure, function, and form were core to New Brutalism. The non-linearity in the Sheffield design encourages movement, perhaps drawing roots to street-level pedestrian walkways and incorporating more humanistic elements in the design. Geometric form had moved way to accommodate for humanistic topology in New Brutalism structures.

The ideals of Brutalism are spread through the design plans of public housing estates featured in *Attack* and *How Blue*, since New Brutalism has the biggest influence on public infrastructures such as council housing estates. Public housing estates in Hong Kong such as those in figure 3 have shown forms similar to Smithsons' Golden Lane design, with shared corridors renditioned in figure 4 encouraging circulation and communication. A Similar architectural motif is found in UK urban council houses such as the Brutalist Heygate Estate (the set for *Attack the Block*).

But the most striking Brutalist motif in Heygate Estate / Wyndham Tower from *Attack* is not found horizontally, but vertically. The stylistic choice of an extensive use of concrete

and the repeating units of living quarters signified by rows of windows in figure 5 is shown from the towerblock's façade through low angle shots, intensifying the repetitiveness and verticality of the complex.

Considering the population distribution in these utopian towerblocks, Ravetz concludes that these towerblocks were hubs of poverty, infant mortality, and unemployment (167). An even stronger case made on whose desires are realised and whose remain as mere desires is when children were getting lost and unable to find home after playing outside due to all the doors being painted white, the agency refused to allow parents to repaint the doors for their children, in fear of ruining "architectural unity" (108). The architecture's dream is loftier than that of the dwellers, contributing as a cause of the urban vertigo pandemic. The viewing lens from Banham shows this rapid urbanisation and verticality, just as Raymond Williams states, lead to alienation and disconnect (15).

## **Dis connect**

What Ravetz accounts for is data from 1939, but her recounts of children's living inside the towerblocks reveals urban vertigo as cases with real-life victims. To look at urban verticality from the bottom is to look at what's in the bottom, the lives of Moses and his gang in *Attack* and the grass-root qualities in *How Blue*.

One of the root causes of urban vertigo is the urban architecture, which is captured and accentuated in *Attack*. No matter how topology and connectivity is promoted within the Brutalist masterplans, human connections, within and without, are shut off in the realisation of Brutalist aesthetics. Figure 5 shows a harshness in the façade of Wyndham tower which seals off the Brutalist ethics. The lives of the inhabitants are also sealed off from the brick façade, unable to connect to the outside. A person walking into Wyndham tower is first forced to navigate the twisting and turning of the outside raised walkway (*Attack* 10:50-11:10), then

stunned by the tower's verticality, finally showered by the sterilising fluorescent floodlights hung at the crown of the tower. To the dwellers of the tower, this can be unwelcoming, as the scenario replicates the experience of being in a prison with the fluorescent searchlights constantly monitoring. The verticality highlighted with the sterilising effects of the showering floodlights also puts the tower dwellers in a position where they are considered dirty and in need for sterilising. To the outsiders trying to go in, the tower can even be hostile.

This can be found similarly in *How Blue* in Yeung's juxtaposition of the estate façade with rows of chicken in a chicken coup (53). The use of hens, a living organism, captured in rows of cages, being force-fed, their movements prohibited. Liveliness is thus suppressed in those drawer-like housing units layered neatly in the masterplan. Those hens are not encouraged to, not that they would, communicate and with one another, for the partitions in-between has sever the building of any bond.

If one is to look closely into the dweller's actions, one would discover further the extent of social alienation and disconnect within society. The scene in *Attack* where the Moses and his teammates have to traverse through a smoke-filled corridor is the perfect representation of such a lost, for it places the people physically in a place with no ways of orienting themselves (1:02:27-1:04:55). The death of Jerome is a tragic but necessary death to reveal the detrimental effects of losing bearings in the densification of urbanism.

This utopian disconnect is made more transparent in Eunice Seng's investigation on utopia, verticality, and islandness, where she places this lens onto current day Hong Kong. The recent boom in the development in Hong Kong is the building of podium towers, buildings with massive shopping malls as the base and towering residential estates above, standing on the landscape like a birthday cake. The locations of these podium towers are often located at major or future transit hubs. She points out that these podium towers are an

act of “utopian islandisation,” islands being an experiment and a getaway (13). Communities of utopias are never intended to connect and therefore stay unconnected as islands.

The word “getaway” invites a reading on movement and scale. These “utopian islands” are often compared with *tong laus*, an old style of housing in Hong Kong with no more than a few stories (Seng 13). The size different, in both its horizontality and verticality, is significant: *tong laus* feature a smaller scale and a commute; podium towers, with its convenience from being a transit hub, allows for greater mobility from the upper living quarters to the lower shopping malls to the even farther workplaces such as CBD. The extended scale points to a greater distance between humans, all while beatified by the advancement of transit technology. The shift from neighbourhood-oriented living in *How Blue* to (broken) family-oriented living in *Attack* to transit-oriented living inferred from Seng is perhaps alarming considering its effects on exacerbating urban vertigo. To traverse such a humanly inconceivable scale is, as a human, to work against the innate concept of human connection and scale. As the towerblocks build higher and higher, as in the final parts of *How Blue*,

Bringing together *How Blue* and *Attack*, it is as if the two form a timeline of urban development, showing the strong interpersonal and person-architectural connections in *How Blue*, to the inability to self-realise under the pressure of urbanisation in the final part of *How Blue*, and finally to the total compartmentalisation and destruction of interpersonal connections in *Attack*. Figure 10 and 11 summarise the utopian disguise: the painting of the paradise offers a dream of bright future, but behind the disguise live the working class, the “social roaches.” The timeline offers a complete, yet dystopic view, as if at the end of each cycle, moving up to the utopia eventually falls, physically like Moses (*Attack* 1:18:40) or mentally the old man (Yeung 135). The timeline offers a complete view, showing a grim progress in city dweller’s journey to lose connection and to drift further into confusion with their urban vertigo.

## The City as a Heterotopia

All accounts seem to reject verticality and urban densification. By looking at urban vertigo as a disease, it seems that they are mere medical cases. But looking at urban verticality from the bottom up shows how urban verticality creates distortion and confusion, how relations between people are more disconnect with urban verticality and urbanisation, and that behind each casefile is flesh and blood.

Individuality is present in *How Blue* with Yeung's use of different colours for different families. The two-page spread in figure 9 captured *How Blue*'s way of tackling the lives within, Yeung's use of perspective drawing to reveal his mindset to challenge the modern understanding of private/public. But it is more strongly present in *Attack* when looking into the living quarters of each of the characters in Wyndham Tower. Figure 10 shows the repetitive motif of Utopian Brutalism in the architecture within; figure 11 shows the significant differences in decorating style, colour, and selection of home decoration among different families. By juxtaposing figure 10 with figure 11, the differences in lighting, with outside using blinding fluorescent lights and the inside using warm lightbulbs, translate to the differences in human interaction and attitudes toward one another. Lives in verticality are forced to navigate with the constant struggle of being connected and disconnect, either to the ground or to the people. The inside of the "cells" in the towerblock destroys the stereotype of uniformity and inverts the sense of isolation once had when viewing the façade.

To look medically is to active rationalise the space one occupies, as a fragmented reality in which public and private go against each other. Comics allow for fragmentation lives depicted and the fragmented speeches made. There is the bias to see what is present, but what is not present is nearly always hidden.

Agnes Ku Shuk-mei's photo album *Where Time Turns Black* embodies such a fragmentation. By allowing hand vibrations during panoramic shots, she received photos that are not perfect, but full of black space and shaky lines. Stories depicted by her poems and her panoramic photos are never complete, fragmented similar Yeung's comics. But by allowing this fragmentation, she shows her cry for her fading To Kwa Wan. There is the desire to achieve picture-perfect photos, but it is intentionally never achieved. Allowing absence amplifies the cry for recognition and attention. If thinking about absence, then in *How Blue*, where are the governments and those who are to protect the city; in *Attack*, where are the upper echelon of the city?

The utopian desire is not to be achieved, but to be sustained, placed in heterotopia, allowed for a constant shift. Desire is always present, giving life meaning and drive. When the city is a desire met, the city is abandoned for another new destination for the upper echelon. Perhaps utopia should stay a desire, not a destination. Lives in cities in reality, instead of being placed in class and turmoil, perhaps should stay in level suspension, keeping the desire of utopia unreachable, and cherish that which should be always achieving but not achieved.

(2456 words)



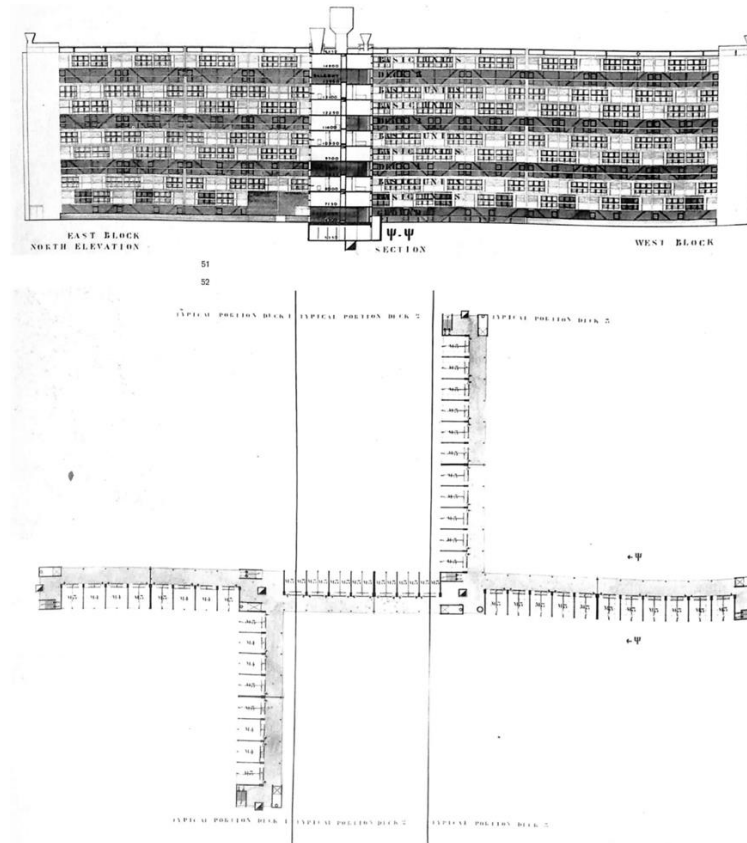


Fig. 1. Elevations (label 51) and street-deck plan (label 52) of Smithsons' Golden Lane Housing competition design. (Banham *The New Brutalism* 50)

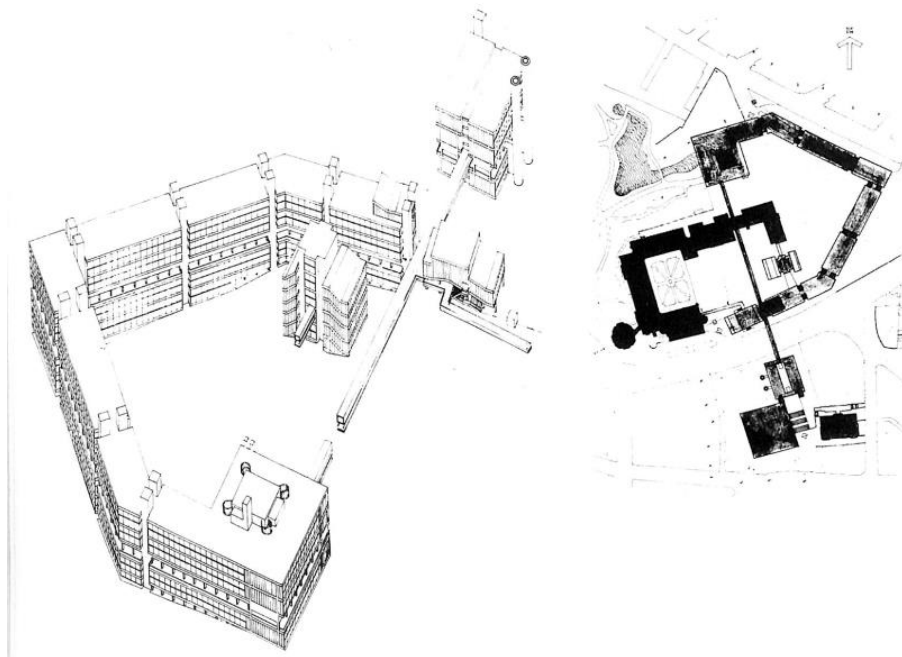


Fig. 2. Isometric view (left) and plan (right) of Smithsons' Sheffield University Extensions competition design. (Banham *The New Brutalism* 52)

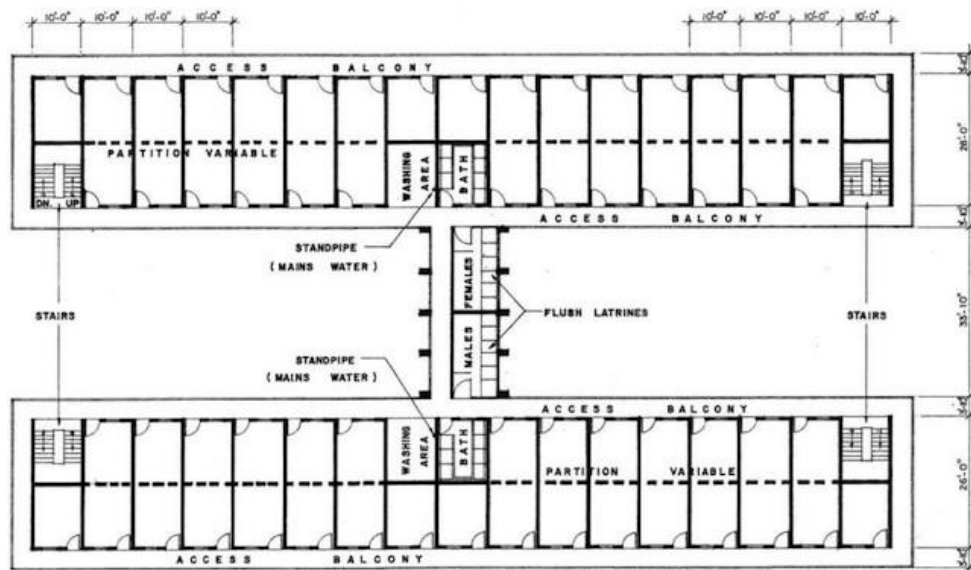


Fig.3. Typical Mark I H-shaped public housing plan in Hong Kong. (Eldus)



Fig.4. Panel showing Lam Tim Estate housing plan and human circulation. (Yeung 20)



Figure 5. Various low angle shots on Wyndham Tower, showing its Brutalist façade and verticality (*Attack* 07:40, 11:53, 1:00:45).

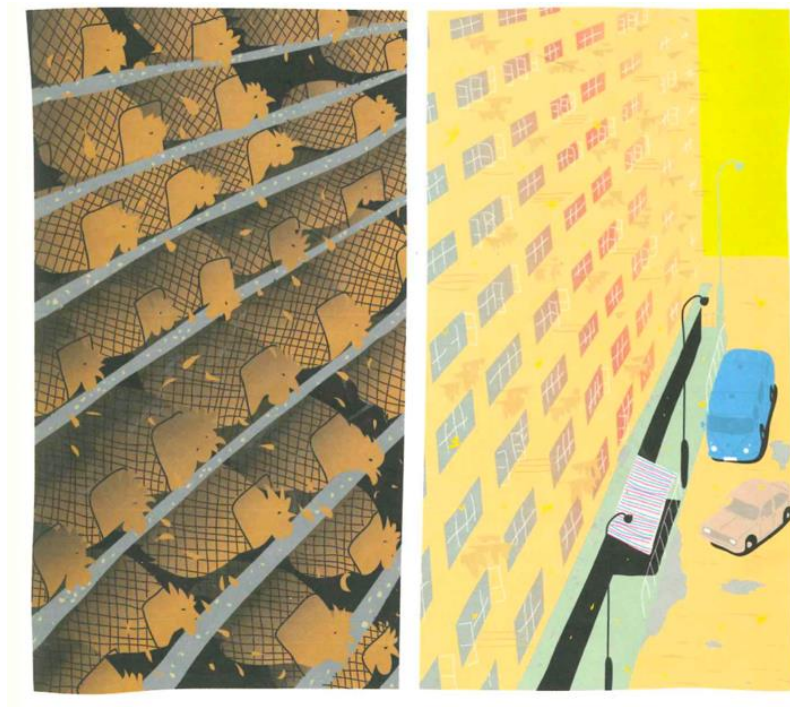


Figure 6. Chicken coup and Lam Tin Estate (Yeung 53).





Figure 7. A painting of the paradise (Yeung 74).

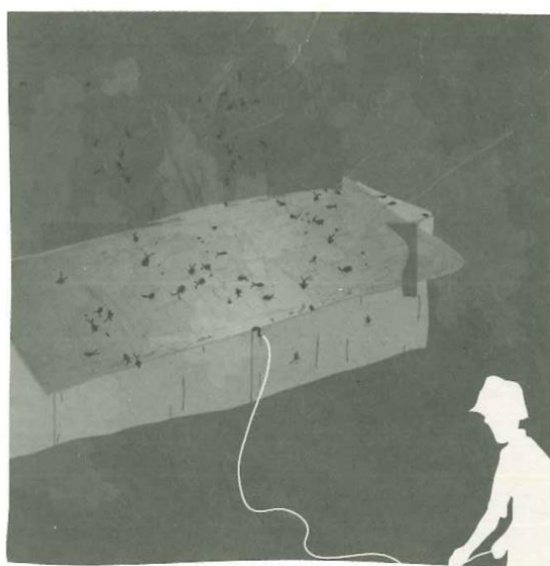
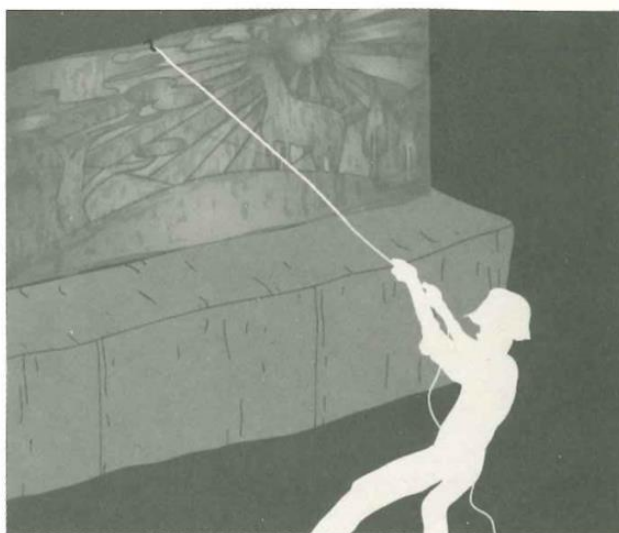


Figure 8. The removal of the paradise (Yeung 133).



Figure 9. A full spread perspective drawing of Lam Tin Estate (Yeung 2-3).



Figure 10. Uniformity found in the design of the corridors, accompanied with the sterilising fluorescent lights (*Attack* 44:52; 49:32).



Figure 11. Colour and individuality found in each of the character's flat (*Attack* 20:48, 38:05, 54:37, 1:15:46).

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