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Dave Hewitt

Peripheral vision: dwelling in and on the Gorbals flats.

"The wind’s whistling

My mind’s twisting"

For a couple of years at the start of the 1990s I lived in the notorious/innovative (delete according to preference) Queen Elizabeth Square high-rise flats. These nineteen-storey ‘streets in the sky’ stood in Hutchesontown, in the heart of the Glasgow Gorbals, and were remarkable structures. Love them or hate them, throughout their 30-year existence there was always scope for seeing the blocks as brutally beautiful, as tall concrete ships cutting through the swell of an urban sea.

‘Queenie’, as it was sometimes known, comprised two narrow ‘slab’ blocks, one double the length of the other. The pair had a roughcast, open-tothe- elements feel which set them apart from the more standard towers built around the same time, and stood as monuments to the rather questionable vision of Sir Basil Spence - an architect whose CV also included the more widely admired (because no one had to actually live in it) Coventry Cathedral. But at least Queen Elizabeth Square was better than Gilbert Ash’s neighbouring and unequivocally notorious Hutchie E complex: 759 dwellings so damp-ridden that the showhouse wallpaper had to be superglued back on shortly before the official opening in 1975.

The Queenie flats might have been less troubled by mould than was Hutchie E, but they harboured problems of their own. The long, windowless corridors brought a dungeony feel to even the higher floors,ìsuch that when a crazy guy laid siege to his landing with a Kalashnikovìthe incident felt almost movie-like. The endoskeletal design was startling and remained difficult to suss out even after months spent living there; an X-ray through the walls would have suggested not so much a dungeon as a rabbit warren. The 19 floors were, for instance, served by only nine corridors and lift-stops. My own room-and-kitchen on the second floor was entered directly from the first corridor, while the majority of flats were positioned either above or below their access level: you opened the door and immediately went up or downstairs. This made it impossibly hard to establish the identity of your through-the-wall neighbour and had the effect of scrambling any sense of community. Someone living ‘upstairs’ on the seventh corridor could have as their neighbour someone ‘downstairs’ on the eighth, who they would never have reason to meet apart from anonymously in the lift. It was very strange and disorientating.

The buildings were not all bad, however. One of the best aspects - as in any high flats - came with the wonderful, if somewhat aloof, view from the higher levels. As my own flat was effectively three or four levels up (the whole building having been built on massive stilts) and faced south, it lacked a Highland panorama. But a couple of friends acquired north-facing flats on the nineteenth floor - the summit ridge of Spence’s huge concrete crag – and in the days (or, rather, nights) before the building was roofed over we would

hold barbecues up top, extraordinary airy gatherings with the stars just above and the city lights way below.

In the daylight, the view north from this height was stunning. The Campsies occupied the middle ground, while beyond and to the left came the first Highland bens: the sharp cone of Stob Binnein, Beinn a'Chroin with its bumpy, confusing-from-distance ridge, Ben Lomond's summit wedge jutting above the nearer Kilpatricks. And farthest and most enticing of all, a clear day would reveal high Ben Lui rising cleanly beyond the Blane Gap.

I have no doubt that the sight-lines to these celebrated hills helped many flatdwellers cope with the dislocation of life in such a bleak vertical environment. To be able to gaze way, way out of the city must have provided comfort even for those who never ventured north to visit the hills in person. But for occupants eager to walk and to climb there was the almost eerie experience of bussing north in the morning, reaching the top of, say, Stob Binnein by lunchtime and then within a few hours being back at home, mug in hand, watching in comfort as, 50 miles away, the sun set on that same hilltop.

At every time of year this felt remarkable, but in winter (assuming the return journey could be made quickly enough to beat the fading light) it provided a wonderful at-one-ness with the world below and beyond, bringing an integration of hills and city, of workaday life and idyllic escapism. Opposites coalesced in these views, and somehow made sense: the rugged and the urban, the quiet and the busy, the wild and the domestic.

To have gazed on a sunset-tinged Munro from afar might not have brought the same satisfaction as bivvying in a high corrie, but it undoubtedly gave a real buzz, just about justifying the excessive council rent and (well, maybe) the day-to-day hassles of high-rise living.

Because I've been up here for a while

I'm starting to feel the monotony of a tower block

Generally, though, folk hated the flats, grand vistas notwithstanding. They were grim places to live, particularly for those with kids, and before the belated appointment of council concierges they could feel uncomfortable - if not downright unsafe - to enter or leave. The lifts were erratic, the back stairs periodically strewn with needles or comatose junkies or both. Sir Basil probably regarded his design as architecturally risqué, but for those living there the buildings were simply risky.

The blocks were divided into A, B and C sections, with the longer block counting as two chunks. Not for nothing were these nicknamed Alcatraz, Bar-L (Barlinnie, the main Glasgow jail) and, dodgy spelling this, Sing Sing. Various hills have steep, hemmed-in places bearing the name Prison – the innermost confines of Skye's Quiraing, for instance, or the crags beneath Swirl How in the Lake District. In no hill location, however, has the description been anywhere near as apt as in these strange and misguided urban structures.

So, if the buildings comprised a form of prison, it was required of me to make regular bids for freedom. This I sometimes did by cycling away to visit friends in various less spartan flats on the city's south side, sometimes by walking into town for a bus that would allow an escape north to the hills, away from it all. I must have set out to climb dozens if not hundreds of hills during my time in Queen Elizabeth Square, as has been the case wherever I've lived during my adult life. Perhaps everywhere is a form of prison, perhaps everywhere needs to be escaped from. Even if some strange quirk left me with the keys to a palace, I would still feel compelled to head off once or twice each week in search of the quieter, roomier places that only the hills provide. Nor, of course, am I alone in this: in any building containing between 150 and 200 homes there will always be a few folk fond of spending their weekends and spare days in the truly high places before returning to the fractious, often fraught confines of the flats.

Mind you, I should qualify that generalisation. I'm entirely confident that this out-of-town, home-to-hill exodus occurs in Glasgow and in each of the main Scottish cities. But quite how one copes if living in a high block in, say, London is something else entirely. Of course a great many individuals in any big city are perfectly capable of surviving high-rise existence without feeling compelled to flee into whatever landscape they see from their windows. There are always those, though, who feel trapped in such buildings and for whom the link with distant horizons is the one thing that keeps them sane, that keeps the walls from closing in.

Scottish high-rise citizens are hugely fortunate in this, as - presumably - are folk who live in tall buildings in those French and Italian cities which give enticing, entrancing views away into the Alps (and who have the advantage of a decent climate, too). But to have no better option than to look out across the Bedfordshire Plain or the slight swellings of the North Downs must surely do something to the Londoner's head, must lock up emotions that would be better free, must turn the multi-storey dweller in on him- or herself in a way that cannot be healthy. High hills ultimately serve no other gods than their own, but they do maintain a useful - if genuinely peripheral - influence on the myriad problems of urban life.

For me, when I lived in the Gorbals, a day on the hill almost felt part of a continuum: a move from one people place to another. This was borne out by how natural and part-of-Glasgow it felt to stroll home down Buchanan Street and over the Clyde, rucksack rigged with axe and crampons after a good winter's day on the Blackmount or Ben Vorlich. To walk across the city so adorned might attract a few amused glances, but by and large folk knew what it was all about, were able to recognise the strange ironmongery that had to be heaved on-bus and uphill for the simple pleasures of sun and snow to be briefly enjoyed.

Goodness knows how the same muddied end-of-day summiteer would be regarded in a southern English city. At best the clanking traveller might be seen as an eccentric holidaymaker or an expeditioner heading home from the nearest airport; at worst they might risk incarceration under some tramp-catching clause of the Mental Health Act or the Poverty Tsar's latest edict. We can't be having unkempt types wandering our streets wielding sharp bits of metal, can we now? The Munro bagger as cousin to the money beggar.

Not in Glasgow, though. Here, such behaviour tends to elicit an appreciative (and even mildly envious) understanding. Unknown people speak to you, say encouraging things such as "On yersel, big man". There can be few cities so hill-friendly, so summit-sussed as this one.

I'm not so manic now

I can uphold the weight of those neighbours

Ultimately, it is people who link high flats and high hills. It's easy to see that flats are designed (however badly) for living. But the question of design doesn't come into the landscape unless you're someìkind of creationist, and much of what is wonderful about hills derivesìfrom the opportunity they provide to evade the swarming throng ofìeveryday humanity. But without climbers, without visitors, any hill is merely a massive tree falling unseen in an enormous forest. And if no one takes note, then no pleasure is derived and it is all just empty and meaningless.

The hills need us - you and me and that studious-looking woman down the landing - to go out and climb them, to give them life. Just as there are few sights sadder than a glen strewn with the toppled stones of long-abandoned shielings, so few things are more meaningless than an unclimbed summit. Those nicey-nicey artistic theories about mountains being better admired from afar rather than actually climbed are, quite frankly, the sedentary whimsies of those overfond of their armchairs.

Hills and high flats are both big on personal space. Residential tower blocks provide the curious paradox of people sardined together yet simultaneously divided into individuals and families. Slice away the side of any high-rise and the resulting doll's house would show rows and tiers of lives progressing unbeknown to each other despite the closest possible proximity.

The hills are home to a different space-ism, based on the value and virtue of out-of-doors solitude. The ridges above the Coe or Kintail may bustle during a holiday weekend, but Scotland remains a big country with any number of empty hills where people can lose themselves just as easily as in an urban landscape's human anonymity. Lonely hills and densely-packed cities stand in opposition to the archetypal village where everyone knows your business, and it is no coincidence that so many of those who spill out to the hills do so from conurbations. After all, these outwardly opposing environments share a basic, underpinning egalitarianism: they each take all sorts, unquestioningly.

So don't be swayed by superficial structural similarities between blocks and bens: it is people who lie at the heart of the strange juxtaposition in Neal Beggs' work. Forget about comparing size and shape: no flats in Glasgow have ever been a tenth as high as any Munro, not even in the days when the original 31-storey version of Red Road disappeared up into the prevailing dreichness. And there are no hills in Scotland anything like as monolithic as the steel-and42 concrete pinnacles of 1960s architectural design. Our hills simply don't look like that, not even the occasional very sheer, very regular crag such as the Sticil above Loch Avon, or Mainreachan Buttress in Coire Lair. These can look manmade from certain angles and in certain lights, but there are no square-sided, stand-alone hills dominating our glens, no crags with the scale and startling form of Norway's Troll Wall or the Trango Towers in the Karakoram. Scotland's best-fit hills/flats analogy doesn't come on the high ground at all, but with sea stacks such as the Old Man of Hoy: monumental free-standing pillars that just about stand up to geological/architectural comparison.

Perversely, the one time I can recall seeing anything truly hill-like in a tower block came when Queen Elizabeth Square was finally demolished amid much hullabaloo and an enormous growling cloud of industrial stour. The deconstruction job drew a huge crowd to whatever grassy mounds or shop roofs gave the best vantage points, creating an intense mood of communal anticipation, as though an eclipse, a rocket launch and Christmas morning were all about to be rolled into one.

Why? Because the flats were not coming down piecemeal, pecked at by cranes and scaffolding, but in a booming, billowing explosion that was to be (so the papers said) the biggest bang in Europe since the end of the last world war.

Demolition Day was a strange day, and never stranger than when my former neighbour Mags and I walked round the enormous rubble-heap in the evening, after the dust had settled. I was fascinated, almost fixated by the debris, not least because our old houses were in there somewhere, mishmashed with a couple of hundred others. Even now, almost a decade on, I can remember being struck by just how scree-like this extraordinary domestic wreckage seemed - a feeling that increased over the ensuing days as hydraulic diggers shoved at and shovelled away the rubble. It was not the rounded, regular, blocky scree of the high Cairngorms, but an eerie, other-worldly chaos, most like (but then not really) the back wall of some fantastically rough Cuillin corrie: a randomised mayhem of landform where higgledy, angular chunks of gabbro and peridotite confronted the climber and seemed as big as houses.

The three lyrics are from Dubstar's Not so manic now.

Dave Hewitt 2000.