



De/Ascending: The double lives of Ballard's High-rise and Torre David (Collage by Sepideh Karami, 2014.)

# DE/ASCENDING: TORRE DAVID, THE SECOND EPISODE OF BALLARD'S HIGH-RISE

SEPIDEH KARAMI

DESCENDING

*In the heart of a struggling financial district, the Tower stood dark and silent—a sad relic of the hopes and ambitions harbored by Venezuelans in the 1970s and early 1980s, and an inescapable reminder of the economic upheavals that followed those boom years.<sup>1</sup>*

On the eve of the death of Jorge David Brillembourg Ortega, the developer of Torre David in Caracas, when everyone was returning from the funeral, the esurient giant Torre David emitted all of the commercial development plans for the financial district over Caracas in one large burp.<sup>2</sup> The repulsive sound and the smell of undigested business plans traveled all the way to the highest point of Barrios San Agustín<sup>3</sup> and seeped into the shack where she was sweltering impatiently in her bed sheets. Although she didn't recognize it at the time, the mesmerizing call of the esurient giant dragged her down from her bunk bed. She prepared to embark her new pilgrimage, beginning with the ritual of packing the few belongings she had, all found in the upper-class city—an outdated and inoperable video camera, presumably from the seventies, that she inexplicably suspected had arrived from the UK; a walking stick; and a wrecked statue of a gull.<sup>4</sup>

She stepped out of the shack, the city breathing under her feet. While the metro cable of San Agustín was frozen in its last operative gesture, the suspended red cabins beckoned her to the pitch-black heart of Caracas, where a remote and gigantic scaffold was contorted in starvation. Her eyes alighted on it. She thought: "My enlarged twin!" and sniffed the smell of its empty stomach. Something bestial began to stir inside her, like a werewolf.

She walked down the hill, focused on absorbing the act of descending into her feeble muscles. As she walked, the tower loomed ever closer; she could see the rapid deterioration of its structure, even from a distance. But there was a promising beauty to this deterioration in the process of building up its "accidental ecology"<sup>5</sup>—an ecology that was about to take shape as she drew nearer. The once-silent corporate structure was molting happily, in partial decay. From somewhere between being a scaffold and a building, between the state of "half-finished" and "halfway to ruin,"<sup>6</sup> between being a symbol of failure and a victory, its ambiguity had been a site of possibilities for those who dared to step in.

INTERRUPTION: SITE OF 'ULTIMATE FICTION'

Two events interrupted many of the future plans of the financial district of Caracas and specifically Torre David: the death of David Brillembourg and the Venezuelan financial crisis of the 1990s.

Torre David, the highest tower in Latin America and a significant building in the financial district, was the symbol of Venezuela's economic boom, but shortly before completion it came to represent the opposite.

The interrupting events, which were the gestures of failure and collapse, turned the building down another route. Left incomplete and vacant for thirteen years, the delays in any attempts at occupancy had created a unique aesthetic quality in the structure, rendering it half-finished and halfway to ruin. The degree of its verticality made it even more explicitly the materialized failure of a commercial development project.

As it had never become what it was born to be, no one could really judge if it was being constructed or destructed; the long period of vacancy had brought the tower into a condition of deterioration, while at the same time making it plead for completion. This ambiguous aesthetic turned it into a completely new environment from which a new way of living in the city could emerge.

Silent and dark. Jean Genet says: "... dreaming is nursed in darkness." It might be the unclear borders between things, their unspecific shapes and forms, the ambiguity and ignorance

accompanied by darkness are what disconnect us from our experienced reality, triggering the imagination and making us dream. The 'silence' and 'darkness' of the tower likewise stirred the imagination, inviting many of those who were in search of proper housing, those who dreamed of living in the city, to squat the building and start a new community. They glided into the structure, turning it into a plot for an alternative economy of urban life: a vertical informality.

There is a certain intensity in the convergence of those two unexpected events, that affected Torre David in its silent and dark life. In his novel *High-Rise*, J. G. Ballard similarly applies the concept of intensity as the engine for the evolution of the plot. He describes this intense moment as the "ultimate fiction."<sup>7</sup> In his *Reconstructing High-Rise*, Rick McGrath explains the ultimate fiction thus:

*In High-Rise, Ballard has created an isolated environment for the close study of how an ultra-modern apartment block can transform its denizens into a new, aggressive society based on the premise that living in a motherly machine will allow your neurons to re-wire into whatever psycho state you've been unconsciously repressing in the "real" world—that place Ballard believes is the ultimate fiction.<sup>8</sup>*

The ultimate fiction is a detached environment where things and the relationships between them could be questioned and problematized, hence allowing for a completely new way of living to be established. In the two cases, the condition of the ultimate fiction is produced from an intense moment, an interruption in an ongoing flow of life or work that has put the case out of its ordinary situation and relations. In his theory of moments,<sup>9</sup> Henri Lefebvre defines moments as intensified elements of everyday life that can make a change, momentarily or for a longer period of time. Hence, intensity is what makes the moment different from its former and subsequent condition: an inevitable state of no return.

In Ballard's *High-Rise*, celebrating the full occupation of the apartment building becomes a turning point. The arrival of the last family in the high-rise, like the drop of rain that causes the flood, triggers a crazy party, characterized by extreme collective joy and anarchy, which leads to violence and becomes the start of a period of social destruction.

This intense moment is when the oppressed middle-class residents of an isolated and remote high-rise in London's docklands enter a new phase of liberation from the middle-class psycho state they have been unconsciously repressing. Ballard creates the last residents of the high-rise as the engine of a destructive machine. By locating this

moment in a vertical high-rise structure with various strata, Ballard creates an environment that is even more intense, an ultimate fiction, where destruction of all defined material and immaterial relations are accelerated.

Departing from a state of destruction, Torre David could be imagined as the next episode of Ballard's *High-Rise*. In the last lines of *High-Rise*, Laing (one of the main characters who survives the barbaric incidents of the high-rise) is barbecuing a dog on his balcony, presumably the former pet of the high-rise's architect. There is a tragedy underway, which has arisen from the ruin of the modern high-rise, and it is represented in a sort of brutality towards both his own body and the world surrounding him.

If Torre David is the next episode of *High-Rise*, it arises from a ruin that triggers a vision of a possible future. Torre David is a model of survival in the brutally segregated city, of how a new idea of collective life can emerge out of a desire for access to relatively safe and proper housing in the Venezuelan capital city.

As the architect Alfredo Brillembourg, whose firm has done extensive research on the tower, says: "It doesn't look good, but it has the seed of a very interesting dream of how to organize life."<sup>10</sup>

#### ARRIVAL

*Later, as he sat on his balcony eating the dog, Dr. Robert Laing reflected on the unusual events that had taken place within this huge apartment building during the previous three months. Now that everything had returned to normal, he was surprised that there had been no obvious beginning, no point beyond which their lives had moved into a clearly more sinister dimension.<sup>11</sup>*

She looked up into the building. The pouring rain embellished the view like a Photoshop filter. She began to count the stories of the building, and when she arrived at the twenty-fifth, she saw a man grilling a dog. The smoke of the burned meat rose into the mist surrounding the tower, turning the building into a factory of decline. To her, a man eating a dog on a half-finished, half-ruined high-rise was the expression of the last struggle of the last lonely man to maintain his biological life while everything—all the structures that had defined his identity—collapsed perceptibly around him. But nothing could deter her from completing her journey.

"I am standing in front of a trick mirror," she thought, perceiving a sort of similarity between her body and the tower. Their fragile bones bore the same burden, the same weight of the Venezuelan financial collapse. They looked at each other with hunger in their eyes.

She felt an urge to enter her enlarged self, to travel into her empty stomach, her neurons and her fragile, incomplete organs. Who was eating whom? She or the tower?

#### ECONOMY OF VERTICALITY

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The key point in the interior flow of the life of a high-rise is the economy of ascent and descent.

There is a hierarchy embedded in vertical structures. The poetics of verticality is the ascension from the ground with one's head as high as possible, reaching toward the sky.

In Ballard's *High-Rise*, the physical representation of class difference runs parallel to the physical ascent of a high-rise from the ground; leaving the ground behind, one moves upward toward a better life and social status. Royal, the architect of the high-rise, who also controls the orders of things, lives in a penthouse apartment there. The rooftop to which he is the closest inhabitant is the perch of many gulls. In Torre David, a rooftop helicopter pad represents the same metaphor. The gulls are Royal's ideal. His relationship with the gulls on the rooftop expresses his desire to uproot his body from the ground and even disconnect from it by means of flying; his body becomes the miniaturized high-rise.

On the other hand, the moment of his death at the end of the novel is depicted as a descent: the descent of the building followed by the descent of the steps of the swimming pool, which is filled with the dead bodies and dismembered limbs of the high-rise's inhabitants.

*Royal, who had clung so fiercely to him during their descent of the building, no longer needed him, and dragged himself away along the line of changing cubicles. When Laing last saw him, he was moving towards the steps at the shallow end of the swimming pool, as if hoping to find a seat for himself on this terminal slope.<sup>12</sup>*

As ascending and descending are the core flows of the high-rise, access to the facilities and architectural elements of vertical movements becomes highly political and important as a metaphor to access power.

Accessibility and inaccessibility to the high-rise's express elevators is a gesture of social status: the higher one is in the building, the greater one's access to faster elevators. And for this reason, staircases and elevators turn into the battleground and sites of struggle for occupation. Blocking the elevators becomes the device of resistance, of interrupting a vertical flow.

What is obvious about the verticality of the plot both in Ballard's *High-Rise* and Torre David is the inevitable hierarchy embedded in any vertical structure.

In the absence of technology, however, this hierarchy is inverted. When the first group of people in search of proper housing arrived in Torre David, they settled in the tower's lowest stories—clearly because of the easy access in the absence of a functioning elevator. Hence, proximity to the ground meant proximity to the city and urban life and increased access to the infrastructure and flows of life in Caracas. In this sense, the value of being on top is challenged.

Ascension challenges the limits of the human body. In *High-Rise*, technology facilitates the act of ascending. However, during the early stages of squatting in Torre David, it was the disarmed body, stripped of all technology, which had to face and challenge its own limits in order to ascend. Later, when the community took shape, motorcycles and cars could move people along the ramps to some upper floors.

Like in *High-Rise*, the stairs in Torre David are also important and critical sites—not only in the sense that they provide accessibility, but also as sites of security: by opening and closing the stairwell, inhabitants provide security and privacy to the whole floor. These are the sites of control.

#### ASCENDING AND CONQUERING

*... with its staircases that lead nowhere and ramps that spiral into infinity.*<sup>13</sup>

The sound of fragments of glass under her feet filled her with a feeling of ecstasy and the pride of victory while ascending the free concrete stairs over the city; the absence of balustrade, the wailing wind, the waiting bent armatures on the treads all promised her an immersive image of the future. The near-touching of the naked armatures of a broken concrete beam like in Michelangelo's *Creation of Adam* seemed to herald a state of becoming; things dead yearned for a breath of new life to turn their silent passive criticality of capitalism into an active and productive state of community building.

She felt like conquering a new universe, experiencing a bird's-eye view of the city that devoured all of her negligible weekly income. A sort of revenge, she thought, is taking from the unjust city, challenging her body to run up the naked staircase to the top of the building. She ran faster,

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reclaiming her body by exhausting it with a plea to occupy, to own a home, to reach the sky. She imagined that this empty giant—a representation of the failure of a commercial program—that had arisen from a highly divided society could engulf the whole city, swallow it whole; ravenous, the giant had already taken her into his huge digestive system. She imagined that she was a parasite.

*[T]here was only one way to keep building. Up.*<sup>14</sup>

On the partially completed roof of Torre David, she sat in the middle of a helicopter landing pad, sweat running down her knees. She took out her broken video camera in its newspaper wrapping and the gull. The roof was deserted, covered in the excrement of birds. She tore a square of newspaper and folded it deftly, all the while reading the news, which vanished with every fold she made. Complete sentences disappeared, lost their meaning, and became open to interpretations. She leaned on her walking stick and stood up, reading the bold text on the gull's wing: 1994, the collapse of Venezuelan Financial Sector.<sup>15</sup> She unfurled her fingers and the gull took flight on the wailing wind over Caracas.

#### RE-DESCENDING?

*... neither a den of criminality nor a romantic utopia, Torre David is a building that has the complexity of a city. It merges formal structure and informal adaptation to provide urgently needed solutions, and shows us how bottom-up resourcefulness has the ability to address prevailing urban scarcities.*<sup>16</sup>

Regardless of the controversial stories circulating about either a center of refuge from the "dangerous" barrios of Caracas or a hub of crime, a decade of living autonomously and organizing a collective life independently builds a sense of community. Now, on July 23, 2014, it seems that a new era is dawning for the high-rise, announced by the president Nicolas Maduro's government. The already-executed forced eviction of Torre David's inhabitants and their relocation to remote areas around the city is a familiar story in urban redevelopment planning and slum eradication. Obviously, the building's central location and the extraordinary views it offered of the city (views for which great sums of money are paid in other parts of the world) were among the explicit reasons that developers could not be kept at bay. Apparently, there are a number of possible plans for the tower, post-eviction, ranging from demolition or reversion to its original, intended function to turning it into a housing tower.<sup>17</sup> Yet whatever the next episode, it would be unwise to ignore the organizational methods and the resultant sense of community created during the decade of the tower's occupation. The tower's next episode has already started with a new *descending*, though we don't yet know how the blanks will be filled:

*Later, as she sat on her balcony \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_, she reflected on the unusual events  
that had taken place within this huge  
apartment building during the previous decade.*

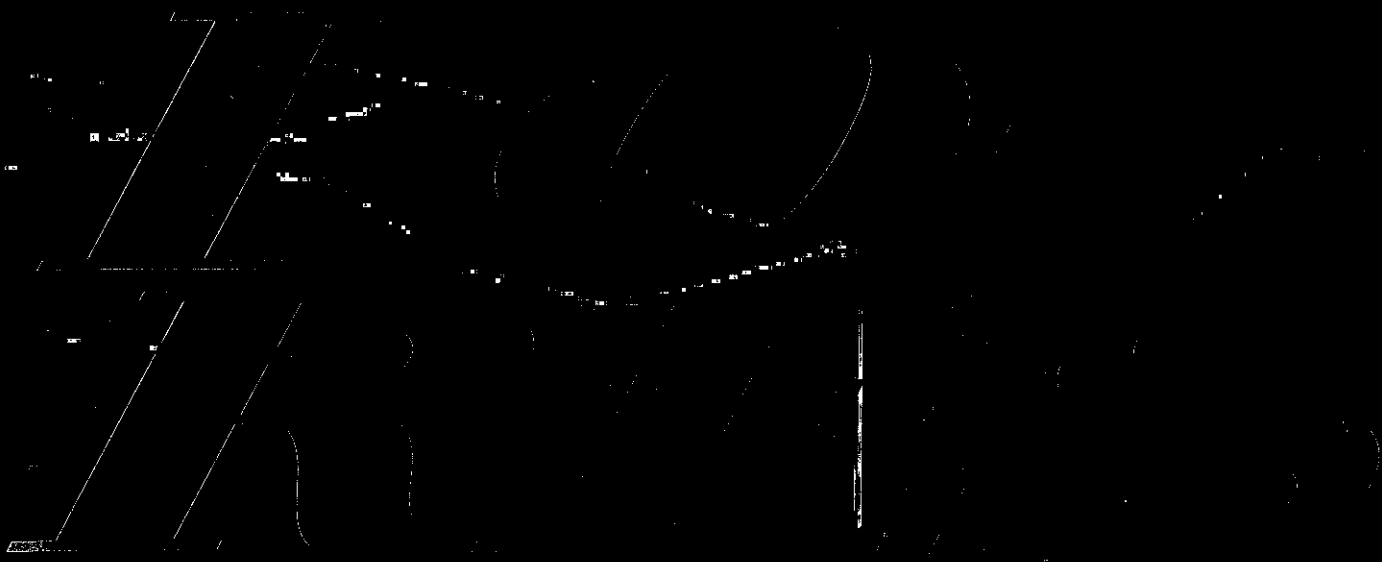


Now that everything had \_\_\_\_\_ into \_\_\_\_\_, she was surprised that there had been no obvious beginning, no point beyond which their lives had moved into a clearly more \_\_\_\_\_ dimension.<sup>18</sup>

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NOTES

- 1 Urban Think Tank, *Torre de David, Informal Vertical Communities* (Zurich: Lars Müller Publishers, 2013), 89.
- 2 This is a fictional reading of real historical events. While the chronological order has been maintained, the intervals' lengths have been manipulated by the author.
- 3 San Agustín is one of the main informal settlements in the surrounds of Caracas. Urban Think Tank's well-known project *Metro Cable* is located in this settlement.
- 4 These objects are borrowed from the objects central to Royal, Laing, and Wilder, the three main characters in J. G. Ballard's *High-Rise*.
- 5 Jill Stoner, *Toward A Minor Architecture* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2012), 102.
- 6 Stoner, *Toward A Minor Architecture*, 103.
- 7 Rick McGrath, "Reconstructing High-Rise," *Adventure Thru Inner Space: Essays and Articles*, May 2004, accessed April 20, 2014, <http://www.jgballard.ca/criticism/highrise.html>.
- 8 Ibid.
- 9 Henri Lefebvre, *Critique of Everyday Life I*, trans. J. Moore (Verso Books, 2002).
- 10 Justin Davidson, "Emergency Architecture: Occupy Caracas," *New York Magazine*, October 9, 2011, accessed July 20, 2014, <http://nymag.com/homedesign/urbanliving/2011/caracas/>.
- 11 J. G. Ballard, *High-Rise* (New York: Liveright Publishing Corporation, 2013), 13.
- 12 Ballard, *High-Rise*, 204.
- 13 Lopez, Virginia, "Tallest Squat in the World becomes Emblem of Venezuela Housing Crisis," *The Guardian*, 21 July 2011, accessed April 17, 2014, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2011/jul/20/worlds-tallest-squat-caracas-venezuela>.
- 14 Adam Fry, "Torre David: Vertical Slum?" *Pulsamerika*, October 25, 2012, accessed April 15, 2014, <http://www.pulsamerica.co.uk/2012/10/25/torre-david-vertical-slum/>.
- 15 Urban Think Tank, *Torre de David, Informal Vertical Communities*, 57.
- 16 Urban Think Tank, "Urban Think Tank Responds to the Forced Eviction of Torre David Residents," *ArchDaily*, July 23, 2014, accessed July 24, 2014, <http://www.archdaily.com/530345/urban-think-tank-responds-to-the-forced-eviction-of-torre-david-residents/>.
- 17 Andrew Cawthorne, "Venezuela's World-Famous 'Vertical Slum' May Be Demolished," *Reuters*, 23 July, 2014, accessed July 24, 2014, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2014/07/24/us-venezuela-tower-idUSKBN0FT02D20140724>.
- 18 Here, I re-write the opening paragraph of Ballard's *High-Rise*.



ARCHITECTURAL RECORD AND ART JOURNAL

ISSN 2002-0260



9 772002 026005

THE JOURNAL OF ARCHITECTURE AND ART

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