

**THE HEIGHT OF
GENEROSITY:**

**ROOFTOPS AND
PUBLIC LUXURY**

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Rooftops tell stories. How we use them, and who we allow to access them, reveals much about the values of our society.

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RETHINK ROOFTOPS

LIVING LIKE THE RICH

When Austrian architect Harry Glück designed the vast 1970s Viennese housing estate Alterlaa, he wanted to make a neighbourhood where people of all backgrounds could – as he put it – “live like the rich”. For Glück that meant outstanding communal facilities, most famously, the epic rooftop swimming pools. There are 14 swimming pools at Alterlaa, half of which are on the roof, boasting views of Vienna in one direction and the distant snow-capped Austrian Alps in the other. The estate is a powerful exemplar; egalitarian municipal strategy meeting expansive architectural vitality. The rooftop pools are the joyful and generous apotheosis of Glück’s social and urban vision.



One of many rooftop swimming pools at the housing estate Alterlaa in Vienna, designed by architect Harry Glück in 1970. (Still from the movie *27 Storeys over Alterlaa* by Bianca Gleissinger)

Rooftops are charged cultural spaces. *Batman* broodily stands on them, surveying Gotham City. It is on a rooftop where Deckard and Roy fight over what it means to be human in the climax of *Blade Runner*. When sending his disciples out to spread the gospel, Jesus urges, “What I whisper in your ear, proclaim from the roof.” Trinity leaps between them in the opening act of *The Matrix*. Hans Gruber falls from one in the final

act of *Die Hard*. In many countries, it is considered good luck to hold a "topping out" ceremony on the roof of new buildings to mark the completion of construction. In other traditions, wreaths are placed upon the roofs of newly finished architecture to invite friendly spirits from nearby trees. Rooftops tell stories. How we use them, and who we allow to access them, reveals much about the values of our society.

In the centre of London are two almost adjacent rooftops. They are by the same architects and commissioned by the same client, but reveal very different attitudes to the possibilities and principles of how inclusive urban civic life should be. The Golden Lane Estate and Barbican Estate, both designed by Chamberlin Powell and Bon for the municipal government, rose from the bombed-out rubble of central London after the Second World War. Both are significant public housing estates with generous recreational facilities and strident architectural languages, yet (as their rooftops reveal) in some ways they couldn't be more different.

If Golden Lane is built around an idea of what the working classes need, the Barbican is built around an idea of what the middle classes desire. But it is the rooftops where the contrast is most obvious.

Golden Lane is a 1950s public housing estate which, though it has gradually gentrified in the decades since its construction, was built to be rented to working-class families and still retains some of that demographic. At its heart is a community hall, public plazas and a sports centre with barbers' shops, bagel cafes and a pub forming its outer crust – decent facilities for ordinary Londoners. The Barbican, by contrast, completed in 1976 at a grander scale, was also built as public housing but with a wealthier resident in mind. It is organised not around humble community facilities but a vast arts centre incorporating galleries, cinemas, theatre, and a 1,900-seat concert hall. If Golden Lane is built around an idea of what the working classes need, the Barbican is built around an idea of

what the middle classes desire. But it is the rooftops where the contrast is most obvious.



Great Arthur House rooftop as part of The Golden Lane Estate in London, designed by Chamberlin Powell and Bon in the 1950s. (Historic England Archive)

At 100 metres, Golden Lane's Great Arthur House was once the tallest residential building in Britain. Clad in bright yellow panels, the fifteen-storey block was to herald a new spirit of municipal generosity with a swooping parabolic canopy shading a chic roof terrace – a common space where stepping stones crossed an elevated pond, and where residents could dry laundry, meet and watch the sun go down. Some years later, when the three Barbican towers arrived, overtaking Great Arthur House at 123 metres each, their tops were markedly different.

Rather than shared facilities, the Barbican's Cromwell, Lauderdale and Shakespeare towers are each topped with an enormous multistorey private penthouse. Where Golden Lane uses its highest rooftop to create a patch of public luxury for the many, the Barbican gives over its equivalent space to private luxury for the few.

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Public generosity versus private luxury is the real story of architecture's relationship with rooftops. In the hands of good urban planners, architects and property managers, rooftops grant restorative reprieve and buoyancy to the city. Open, generously used, and inclusive rooftops are like a harmony, enriching and complementing the main melody of the cityscape. But if left to the machinations of purely commercial interests, rooftops are quickly locked away from public access, gated behind high price tags and commodified into hotel bars or penthouses – exclusive spaces for high-rollers only.

HIGH-RISE HIERARCHY

A mile north of the Barbican, a vast slug-shaped “groundscraper” is nearing completion. More than twice as long as OMA's De Rotterdam is tall, the enormous new London HQ for tech giant Google is one of the largest office buildings in Europe. Atop its 350m bulk is an 8,590 square metre rooftop garden, so expansive that it's already sustaining wild foxes. Holding up the garden, and the deep vats of earth needed for its many trees and shrubs, are 15,900 tonnes of steel structure.

Steel used in buildings accounts for around 8% of the world's carbon emissions. On average, every tonne of new steel produces 1.85 tonnes of CO₂. Bjarke Ingels Group, the Danish architecture firm that collabo-

rated with Heatherwick Studio to develop the new Google HQ, claims "the project emphasises sustainability in all aspects of the building's design", but is spewing 30,000 tonnes of carbon on steel a sustainable price to pay for a publicly inaccessible roof garden?

The rooftop garden of Google's landscaper is an example of performative private luxury. The canopy of leafy branches will poke out above the roofline, visible from the street, boasting of the company's wealth and the amenities its employees enjoy. It's more of a recruitment billboard than a rooftop garden – "work here and you can enjoy this private sky glade" – symbolically and literally separated from the plebs below. It's architecture that uses its private rooftop as a shouty social stratifier.

Dystopian 1975 science-fiction story *High-Rise* by J.G. Ballard explores post-war social hierarchies through the lens of modern architecture, including rooftops. The book is set within a vast new fictional tower block organised vertically by class. Technical workers and their families live towards the bottom, with middle-class professionals, a shopping district and a swimming pool higher up. Right at the top are the upper class, "the discreet oligarchy of minor tycoons and entrepreneurs, television actresses and careerist academics". Anthony Royal, architect of the imagined superblock, lives in a penthouse suite next to a shared rooftop garden that inevitably comes to play an unsettling role in the novel's narrative arc.

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At first, Ballard's rooftop garden seems benign; open to all with an observation deck and playground. Readers are told the space, "fitted with

swings, roundabouts and play-sculptures, had been specifically intended by Anthony Royal for the amusement of the residents' children." But as the social life of the block decays, the garden becomes a locus of class conflict. Successive groups of children from the lower floors are turned away as the richer occupants begin restricting access to the roof. Soon the gates are padlocked. In the surreal final act, Royal discovers the rooftop garden "drenched with blood" as murder (and even cannibalism) take over the tower.

We seem confused about who high-up rooftops should be for and how they should function.

The social anxiety running through *High-Rise* – the fear of what people of different backgrounds would do to each other if they lived cheek-by-jowl vertically – tells us something about our schizophrenic relationship with tall buildings. They are at once symbols of municipal socialism and simultaneously of elite wealth. Balfour Tower, for example (whose architect Ernő Goldfinger, inspired the character of Anthony Royal by living on the top floor), is seen by some as a dreary eyesore and by others as a pinnacle of high-rise living. How is this polarisation possible? One of the reasons Britain, in particular, is so confused about whether living at height is a symbol of luxury or poverty is surprisingly dull: mortgages. British bankers are reluctant to lend to families hoping to buy homes in tower blocks, so the only social groups generally able to live up high are the destitute (who are placed in municipally-owned high-rise blocks by local authorities whether they like it or not) and the very wealthy (who can buy skyline penthouses without borrowing cash). But in other countries, too, we seem confused about who high-up rooftops should be for and how they should function.

FEAR OF HEIGHTS

What would a serious municipal rooftop strategy look like? I have drawn a line between an architecture of public luxury and generosity, in which rooftops are freely open to varied communities, and an architecture of private luxury and elitism in which they are gated spaces for the wealthy few. But reality is always more complicated than such simple distinctions. In fact, that exuberant rooftop garden at Golden Lane – the one I gushed over so enthusiastically earlier in this text – is, like Ballard's fictional rooftop sculpture garden, now padlocked. Its ornamental pond-in-the-sky has been drained, and its doors are closed even to residents of the tower it sits above. Despite owning one of the most lovely rooftop terraces in London, the municipality refused to keep the space open for the benefit of the communities it was intended to serve.

It's not just recreational rooftop spaces that have been shuttered. Russian-born architect Berthold Lubetkin and Tecton's Spa Green Estate, completed for the former Metropolitan Borough of Islington in 1943, included an aerodynamic canopy designed to enhance the evaporative effect of breezes for drying laundry. But in 1976 the Greater London Council (GLC) closed approximately 1,000 laundry and drying spaces overnight, including Spa Green. The GLC promised the closures were a temporary safety measure following a freak accident that had injured a young girl, but the facilities never reopened. Spa Green's roof terrace has now been closed for over five decades. Cowardly civil servants doubtless have wrung their hands and complained of the dangers of allowing the general public up to high rooftops without guardrails or constant supervision, but they need a reality check.

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Spa Green Estate by architect Berthold Lubetkin designed for the former Metropolitan Borough of Islington in 1943.

Roads are far more dangerous than heights but are rightly not fenced off. Neither are beaches or rivers. The instinct that drives the locking off of high places is not a genuine balanced concern for public safety, but a myopic fear of lawsuits in the unlikely event of an accident. Gating rooftops is the selfish impulse of a patrician lanyard class who, in their personal lives, take measured risks like everyone else; drinking alcohol, smoking cigarettes, breaking the speed limit, jaywalking and so on, but when making decisions on behalf of the public, will happily deny entire communities access to their own roof garden 'for safety reasons'.

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It turns out the architecture of public luxury without a genuinely publicly spirited public authority has a short shelf life. The only thing less gen-

erous than luxury for the few is luxury for none. How could municipal authorities better embrace, ensure and incentivise the strategic, generous and joyful use of roofspace? What policy levers could elected leaders pull to oblige Google to make its high-carbon garden open to passersby as well as employees? What cultural change could have kept the doors of Golden Lane's rooftop terrace unlocked? And what about gentrification?

Ascending to a rooftop is like going on holiday in your own city – it changes your brain.

THE ROOFTOP BAR: AN ESTATE AGENT'S WET DREAM?

Frank's Cafe, a rooftop bar perched on a multistorey car park in Peckham, South London, is a flashpoint in the debate about gentrification and rooftops. Designed by Practice Architecture (which later matured into the eco hot-shots Material Cultures), the timber structure and retractable red canopy were built in 2009 and proved an overnight triumph. Within weeks, hordes of young professionals were flocking south of the River Thames to drink negronis and take in the spectacular views. Peckham is a relatively deprived and significantly Black neighbourhood, and the crowds of richer, whiter visitors travelling to the new bar felt, to many, like a first wave of impending gentrification. Sure enough, Peckham is now undergoing dramatic change with more bougie bars opening and 20-storey developments planned within a stone's throw of Frank's.

A rooftop can transform your perspective of an entire area. Districts that might previously have seemed unfamiliar, or even intimidating, can suddenly feel inspiring and full of possibility when seen from above. Height does something to us. The phenomenon of vertigo, the stomach-churning queasiness that accompanies seeing a long drop, is well-known, but there's something uplifting about a rooftop view too, especially when seen for the first time. When I ran the Open House Festival, I saw this

phenomenon first-hand every time we opened the iconic rotating viewing floor of London's BT Tower for public tours. On exiting the elevator, visitors would seem visibly joyful, beaming at each other as they got to see their city from a new perspective.

This phenomenon is well known to psychologists. The same brain processes are taking place when we go abroad. The body, emancipated from its usual humdrum routine of commuting and work, is experiencing the world anew, building fresh synaptic pathways and forming strings of novel memories. It's why vacations seem to fly by in an instant at the time, but when remembered later, feel like they stretched on for weeks. Ascending to a rooftop is like going on holiday in your own city – it changes your brain.



Frank's Cafe, a temporary rooftop bar in Peckham, South London. Designed by Practice Architecture. (Photo: Richard Bryant 2009)

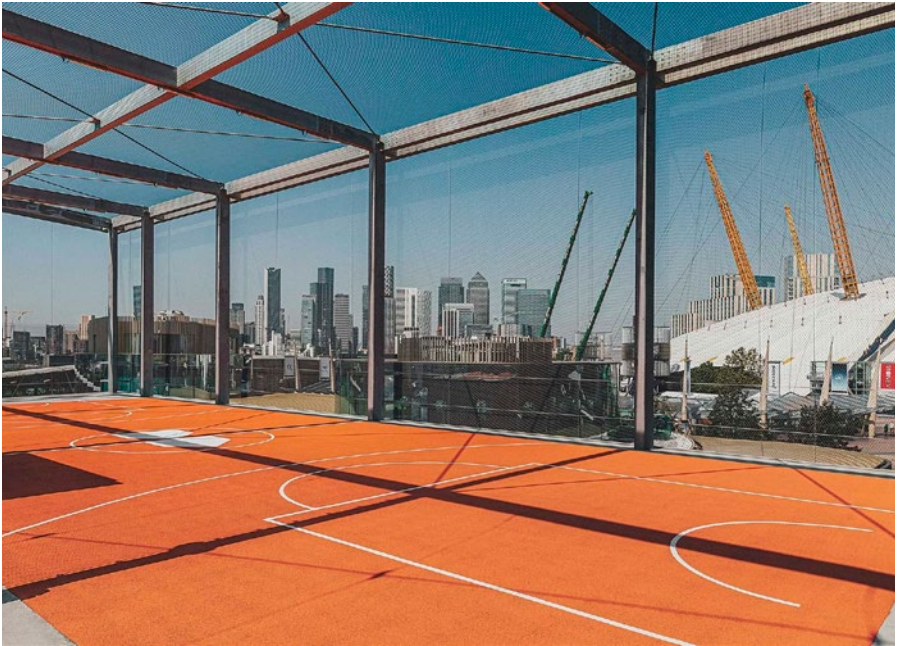
Frank's, then, was inadvertently an estate agent's wet dream, drawing potential buyers to a neighbourhood they may not previously have visited while flooding their bodies with alcohol and endorphins as they gazed out towards the Shard and other South London landmarks. How many house-hunting couples will have tottered tipsily home from a date night at Frank's, thinking: "What about moving to Peckham?" Booze and height are a persuasive combination; no wonder the BT Tower viewing floor was recently sold to a hotel chain to become a fancy restaurant. But as rising rents displace urban communities in city centres across the continent, could rooftops play another role, not exacerbating but softening the sharp edge of gentrification?

PUBLIC LUXURY STRATEGY

The Design District is a curious cluster of buildings, each by different architects, near the Millennium Dome in Greenwich. Among others, there's a pod-like food hall by Selgas Cano, a terracotta office space featuring figurative Damian Hirst sculptures by David Kohn Architects, and a gleaming silver university building by Barozzi Veiga with a scrolling LED text screen running along its facade. Most of the Design District's roofs are unremarkable except one, by Architecture 00, which is topped with a mesh-wrapped basketball court. The court is open to workers based in the district, though few use it. Instead, the main clientele are teenagers who hire (or sneak into) the space to shoot hoops after school. Unlike Frank's, a rocket pack on gentrification in Peckham, the 00 basketball court does the opposite, tempering the arrival of slick design professionals with a steady stream of local school kids.

That basketball court, and the entire Design District, in fact, would not have been built without public sector vision. The Mayor of London has few powers compared to municipal leaders overseas but was able to force Chinese developers Knight Dragon to build the Design District as a condition of granting planning permission for a far larger scheme. The rooftop basketball court is a sop of public generosity carved out from an otherwise commercial masterplan. It's a brake on the socially corrosive

pace of gentrification and a genuinely useful amenity. So how could municipalities elsewhere make better use of their rooftops, demanding more adventurous, magnanimous inhabitation?



Basketball court by Architecture 00 in The Design District in Greenwich.

(Photo: Taran Wilkhu)

I propose that every city should adopt a public luxury strategy, rooted, in part, in tactical rooftop audits. Local authorities need to see their role as key enablers of, and more importantly, the gatekeepers to, a generous cityscape, packed with shared civic amenities. There's a role for local government in thinking through whether BT Tower's rotating viewing gallery should become an exclusive hotel restaurant or something more accessible. For every Frank's pushing up property prices, urban planners should be demanding basketball courts or other facilities to keep gentrification in check. Building a rooftop swimming pool for every thousand or so residents, as Glück did in Vienna, may be beyond the scope of most municipalities, but there are so many opportunities for public luxury hiding in plain sight at height. The Ballardian padlock on

the gates of that Golden Lane roof terrace should be sawn off tomorrow and its ponds refilled. Lubetkin's aerofoil laundry terrace should be reinstated. Sometimes creating public luxury is as simple as opening a door to the rooftop.

