

RESIDENTS' EXPERIENCES OF BALFRON TOWER

David Roberts, August 2014

Following his eight-week stay in Balfron Tower, Ernő Goldfinger wrote a detailed report to the GLC which begins, "The success of any scheme depends on the human factor - the relationship of people to each other and the frame of their daily life which the building provides." It is beyond the scope of this brief text to attempt the difficult and elusive task of assessing success, and it does not provide the occasion to rehearse the tower's difficult history as it has come to stand in the economic shadow of Canary Wharf. Throughout the shifting course of opinion, both expert and popular, certain judgments of Balfron Tower have been accepted uncritically – correlating its architecture of dramatic proportions with a way of life as stark and severe, ill suited to the needs of families, and at a high density in which socialisation is difficult.

Goldfinger theorised elsewhere that the sensation of space cannot be experienced by contemplation from outside, it only comes from being within. The aim of this supporting document is to draw from residents own words to identify the aspects of the building they value and convey how unique design features have framed their everyday experiences. This seems pertinent considering the great time and attention Goldfinger gave to meeting Balfron's residents, asking questions and responding to feedback. This evidence comes from an ongoing doctoral research at the Bartlett School of Architecture which has involved individual oral history testimonies and performative group events with thirty current and former residents of Balfron Tower, comprising a wide range of tenure types; social rented, leaseholders, shorthold tenancies, property guardians, artists on live-work schemes; some of whom moved in 46 years ago as work on the tower was still being completed above them, some as recently as the beginning of this year; and whose homes span the full height, from the ground to 24th floor. The following short excerpts have been gathered from ten residents who exemplify this range of perspectives and who have given consent for their words to be included in this document, and organised under six themed headings.

Domestic experience

Common to residents is a feeling of intimidation upon first seeing Balfron, a building many would have never imagined inhabiting. This evokes negative associations, the "kind of thing that you think of with inner-city tower blocks, but actually I found it to be a very different experience when I moved in." "When I knew I had to live here and I didn't have any choice, I wanted to run away, I didn't know anything about the tower. As soon as I moved in to the 21st floor I just total fell in love with it, everything about it." Whilst its architecture is still too brutal in expression to some eyes, there is universal appreciation of the private and sociable ways of life it accommodates from within, "It's a very trendy thing now, it's in fashion – what I like about it is being inside it."

Interior layouts

Residents value the organisation and character of interior layouts, "It's a lovely size in terms of the flat and I love the design." "I think the flats are wonderful places to live." "I can't think of anything I'd change in this flat." The flats delighted first tenants as they were bigger and lighter than anything they were used to, "it was like a palace," and are still recognised as superior today, "The flats are a great size, spacious - a luxury considering all the shoe boxes being built", "It's a better design than anything

now,” offering “the space to reflect and create,” “to live in I don’t think you can get much better.”

Materials and detailing

Over decades of changing fashions, the interiors have been decorated to different tastes - overlaid brick cladding, thick pile carpets, patterned wallpaper - but many of the original design features remain and have lasted well, such as the full height timber windows, light switches set into door frames and pre-cast flower boxes that have encouraged wildlife - herons, peregrine falcons and “squirrels [that] made it regularly to what I assume was the 23rd floor.” “The planters are very useful. I don’t think we would have thought about growing anything if they hadn’t been there. They also have a self-draining mechanism which makes it easy to water them. Since living here my flatmate and I have really got into tomato and marigold growing.” Residents admire the “tremendous force attached to its material and its detailing” and the privacy that comes from “very good soundproofing” and “low noise from neighbouring flats” which enable some to feel “enclosed and safe.” A mother described how it was a nice environment to raise her baby in Balfron “because the flats were quiet” and “really well designed.”

Quality of light and views

Most flats are double aspect except those on the south-face that are triple and two-person flats that feature a sash window in the kitchen which opens onto the walkway facing east. Though residents complain that the full height partially glazed screens can be draughty, they cherish the quantity and quality of light they provide. “Goldfinger designed with an awful lot of light. You live in the space in a different way. It affects your being. And that’s critical to your entire existence.” “I felt an incredible calm and feeling of wellbeing.” “In the morning you wake up to eastern light in your bedroom and in the afternoon you have the evening light streaming into your kitchen and lounge. You can also stand in the middle of the apartment and look out of the windows on each side and feel like you are on some kind of very long axis of London.”

No matter how high residents live, with different proportions of city and sky, the view has become vital to a sense of spaciousness and belonging. It enhances the space in flats, giving the feeling “like you have an outdoor space in your front room,” that “extend[s] outside the boundaries of our living room,” but also of the estate, “The view, not just outwards towards London skyline but inwards towards the Brownfield area. It’s a very communal view and often there are kids playing in the sunken playground. It’s been lovely these past few weeks of summer to come home and have a cup of the tea on the balcony and just listen to the sound of activity below.”

The view is a source of personal contemplation and identity; “The fact that it’s in the sky is so important to it. I do feel a Londoner up here, ironically, you do see the cranes, you see the horizon as it changes, to see the Gherkin being built, to see the Shard, incredible.” “Especially at the night coz everything was lit up... To me it was just like fairy lights. It was like fairy land, truly.” One resident who has lived with view for twenty years held a small postcard print of German Romantic painter Caspar David Friedrich’s *Wanderer above the Sea of Fog*, “That’s me looking out of the window, that’s how I feel looking out of the window. That’s my image of my life in the flat overlooking London.”

The view is also a backdrop and focus to the conduct of communal relationships, "You don't really watch TV when you live somewhere with a nice view... every time you look out you can see different things". "We felt very magnificent being up there. The view, we could see Battersea Power station on a good day, you see everything from there. I think for social housing tenants to lose the view is such a terrible theft of experience."

Communal experience

The first to move in remember the sociability concomitant with existing communal ties, "I was here forty-odd years. I loved it. Everyone would help one another. You knew your next-door neighbour, you knew everyone. Even in the block, because as we moved the whole street moved into the block with us. So we still knew everyone and there was such a friendship and everything." When asked about the communal experience today, residents acknowledge the consequences of long periods of poor social policy and unfailingly mention the now sealed-off laundry and amenity rooms, unreliable lifts and inaccessible garages. But the feeling of neighbourliness is not restricted to Balfron's early 'golden age', the nine distinct corridors which lead to three levels of flats offer "more chance of meeting neighbours" and can be a "great place to meet the neighbours and chat." The intimacy these spaces provide is unexpected, "it is the first time in my life I've got to know my neighbours," the "friendliness isn't something I've experienced in other parts of London," "It was very very friendly which I was surprised at. The older people speaking in the lift to you. You know the young lads mucking around. It was really lovely."

Collective memory

The longest-serving residents remember meeting Goldfinger at his parties, "He introduced himself and he asked our opinion of different things, what we thought of this and that. And he weighed it all in, so that when he built the other building, he done the adjustments, you know what I mean... He noticed it all and he righted it." Similar anecdotes have survived generations of new residents through continued conversations between neighbours, that have meant residents are well informed and inspired by its history. This enduring shared legacy gives a uniqueness to everyday lived experience and continues to bring residents together who learn more about Balfron's unique architecture and history and consequently feel pride in living here, "Trellick is more famous, but this place is more close to his heart in the fact that he lived here." "I tapped into the Goldfinger thing, I painted my whole flat gold... I felt I could be really creative here... [it] opened up a new world to me."