Welcome to the High-Rise





Balfron Project II

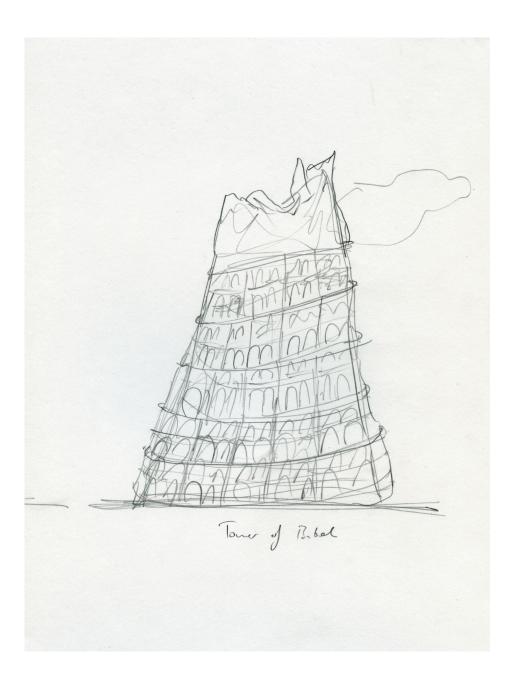


Ernö Goldfinger dreamt of a vertical future for London. His vision of a highrise metropolis sought to free the ground from the viral spread of suburbia that he saw dominating the city in the 1960s. Over four decades have passed since Goldfinger's aspiration to raise the streets into the sky was made concrete with the construction of Balfron Tower in 1967. Perched on the lip of the Blackwall Tunnel in Poplar, at 27-storeys the Brutalist monolith continues to dominate the surrounding skyline, a lasting monument to the ambition of an architect.

The Balfron Tower and its current inhabitants are the protagonists of Simon Terrill's Balfron Project, featuring the mural-sized photograph Balfron Tower. Captured on film with a large-format camera during one evening in November 2010, current Balfron residents were invited to participate in the image by choosing how they wished to be represented within the final picture. The Tower was flooded with stage lighting and a specific sound cue was used to herald the next shot. Each exposure lasted for 10 seconds and so with the opening of the lens, a strange stillness came over the building as movement would result in blurred erasure and those present needed to be stationary in order remain visible. As a resident of the tower himself, Terrill's vision for the Balfron Project was not to fictionalise nor expose the lives of those who call the tower home but rather, for the first time since the building's inception, to generate an arena for reciprocal viewing. By offering the residents the opportunity to return the camera's gaze in the manner of their choosing, it became the role of the characters to compose the subject.



The **Camera Knows** What You Are Thinking Hold One Thought The Camera Wants to Know You



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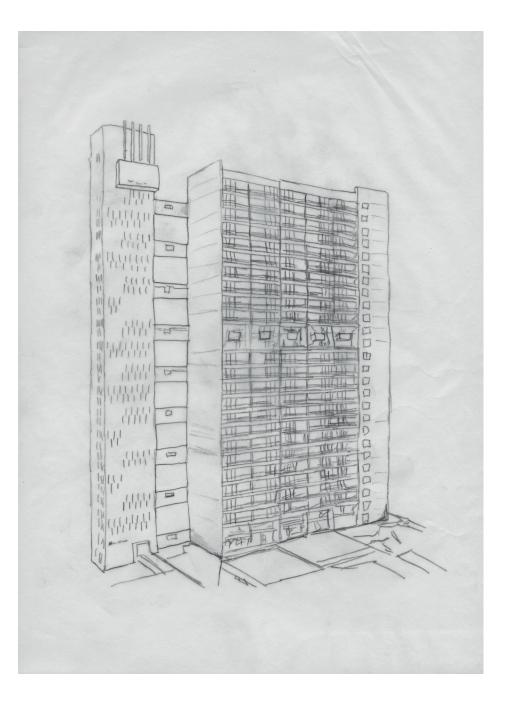
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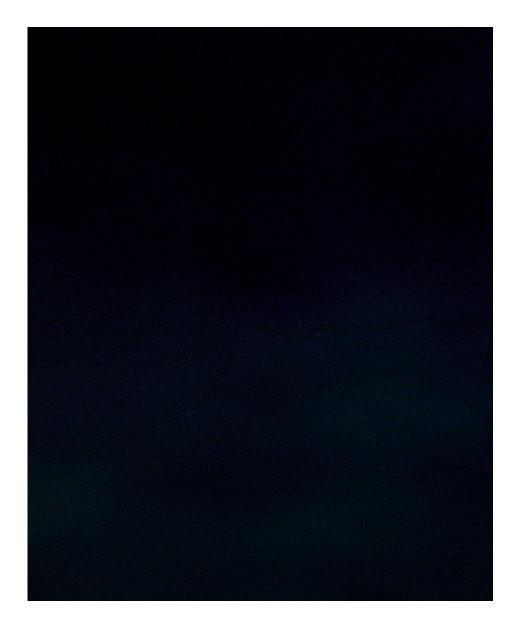
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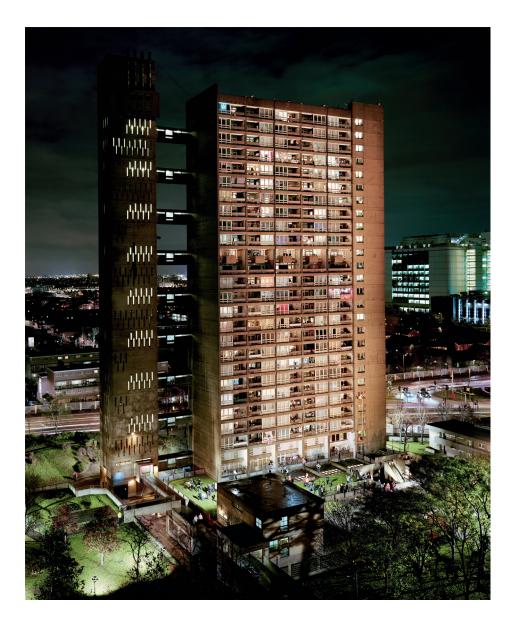


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Fantastic not

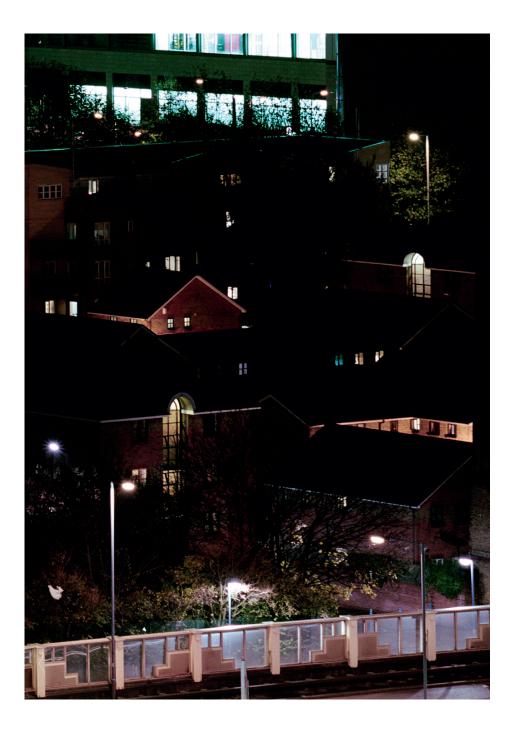


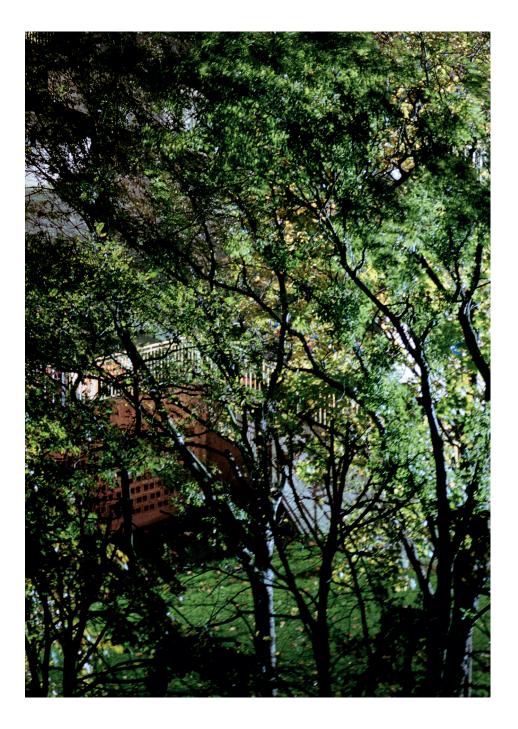
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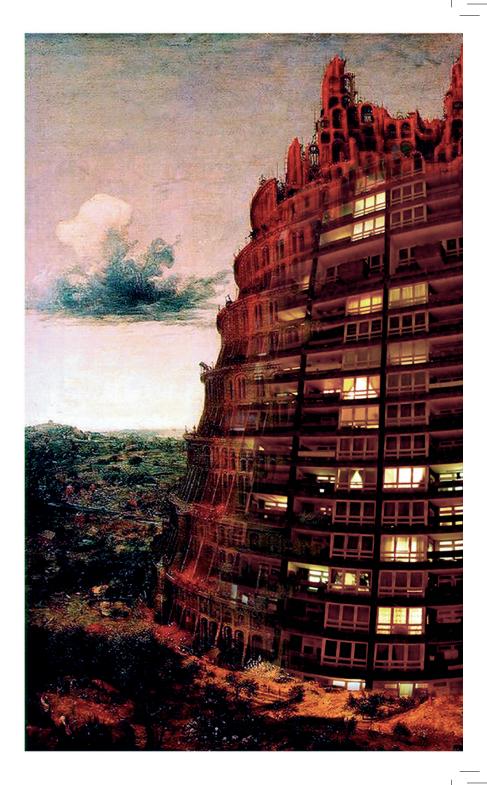


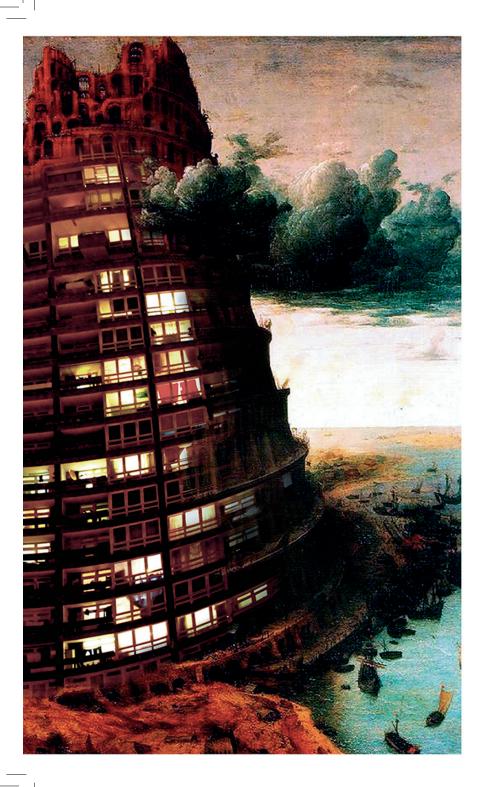


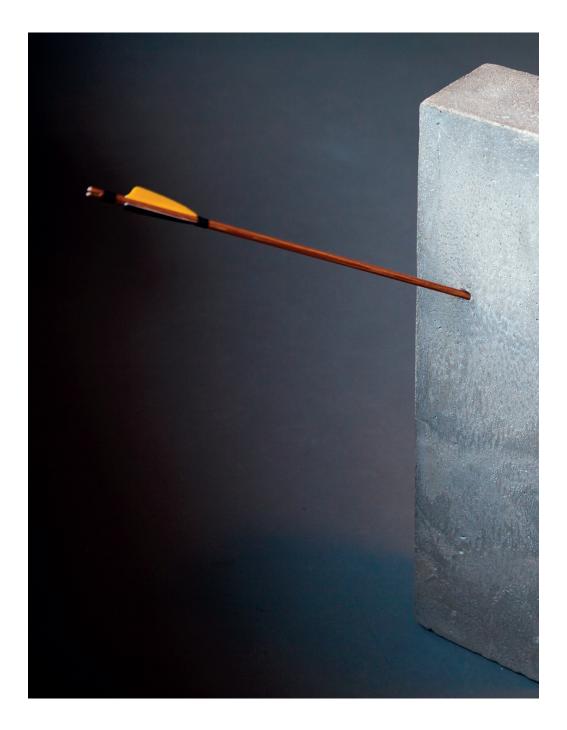


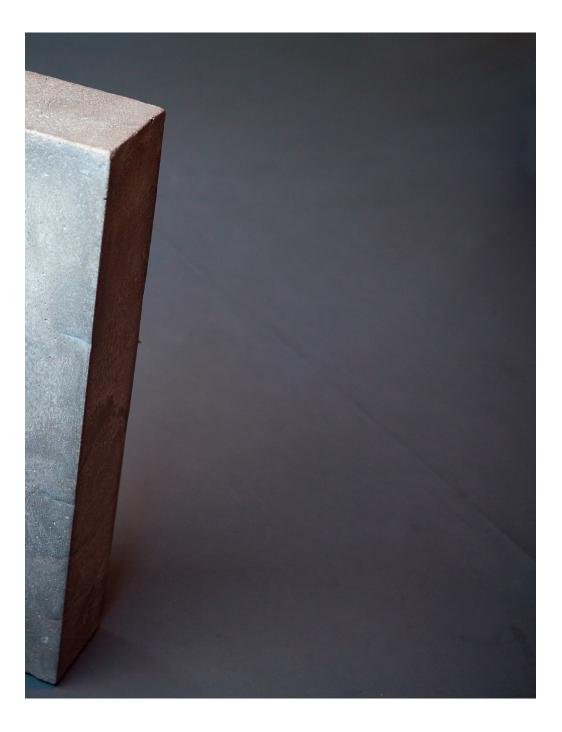












A Balfron Story

Later, as he sat in his studio looking at the work, Simon Terrill reflected on the unusual events that had taken place within this huge apartment building during the previous nine months.1 For this photograph he had moved into the 21st floor of Balfron Tower, 10496 miles away from his previous home. From this height he could see all of London without being seen himself. The view was extraordinary. Looking out from the windows, your eyeline was at the same level as the horizon. You could easily think that you were standing on the deck of a great concrete ship, if it weren't for the squirrel that defied both gravity and sense by appearing on the balcony every so often. From his bed every morning he could see the angry traffic lining up at the entrance to the Blackwall Tunnel. Sitting at the kitchen table he saw London erupt on Guy Fawkes Night, watched the Eye change colour and a supermarket change hands. He kept time by looking out to the clock a few blocks away above the little market where he purchased the phone that never worked and the earplugs bought to block out the traffic that had been stolen from the box so when he got home he discovered that all that was left were instructions. Standing on the balcony he could see the lights being turned on at the Brownfield Social Club and knew that they were open when the butt-filled bucket had wedged open the back door. It was a small veneered drinking spot, open every other night, growing out of the walkway to the tower and decorated with sporting heroes from the 1970s and fluorescent lighting. He became their 52nd member.

He could see everything from Balfron Tower but the tower itself. Unlike Guy de Maupassant who famously disliked the Eiffel Tower so much that he frequently dined in its restaurant because it was the only place in Paris where he didn't have to see it, Simon wanted not only to be inside the tower, he wanted to look at it too. As tireless as the spectacular view from its heights, was the continuously astonishing sight of the tower itself from outside. An anomaly in the landscape, it loomed in space like a concrete castle. It was Brutal, both in genre and encounter, yet when viewed from the side was so slender that it could almost be considered delicate. It was like living inside of a sculpture.

A long-time Ballardian and fan of High-Rise, Simon became obsessed with Ernö Goldfinger, the architect of Balfron Tower. Following its construction forty-four years ago, Ernö and his wife Ursula had also lived in the building. They hosted champagne parties for their neighbours in an effort to discern the residents' reactions to their new home. Goldfinger wanted confirmation that the spirit of community could continue to exist within this overhead suburbia that he saw as being the future of London. Soon after he moved in, Simon delivered homemade flyers informing all Balfron residents of his upcoming photographic project: a portrait of the tower and its inhabitants in 2010. The letterboxes in Balfron Tower had been built into the front door of each apartment, a vertical slit lined by a black bristled moustache. It was hard to push the A4 paper though some of the more tightly compressed hairs and there was an incident on the 6th floor where he had inserted his hand into the slot to get the flyer inside and his finger was severely bitten by a dog. Simon invited his neighbours to visit him in his studio flat and answered questions about the event that was to take place in the coming months.

It wasn't the first time he had embarked on such a venture. For the past six years he had been working on a photographic series called Crowd Theory that saw him focusing on specific sites like railway stations, ports, sports fields and other inner-city apartment blocks, meeting all involved with those settings and responding with a mural-sized photographic portrait of both people and place. Simon's background in theatre and sculpture can be seen in the pictures he makes. His photographic shoots become stages complete with lighting and soundtrack but importantly, without choreography. Each body he invites to take part chooses to participate and they direct their own movement and placement within the image. It's a little Brechtian, but instead of the audience being made aware of their critical role, it is the subject who is presented with their own character, as their world becomes a stage for the art.

It was however, the first time that Simon, as a Balfronian, belonged to the community that he was portraying. He had always struggled with the term 'community', seeing it as a manufactured attempt at coherence and belonging, and yet it was the idea of community that defined the work. Perhaps it was an artist's fear of affiliation, as with Groucho Marx not wanting to belong to any club that would have him as a member. In this instance, Goldfinger's vision for Balfron Tower was probably more inclined towards Karl Marx in its dream of community fulfillment. This vision infused Simon's thoughts as much as it did the giant concrete block that remained standing as a testament to its belief. Living within the relic of a utopian dream, Simon is nonetheless part of a community of artists living amongst a community of Bengalis and East Enders. Together they form the Balfron community.

As the November shoot drew nearer, he searched for the right place to situate the large format film camera that was to capture the image on the night. It was the end of summer and the trees were mostly bare, except for the three that stood directly in front of the tower. The decision was made to shoot from the right, on the roof of Glenkerry House across the road and Simon worked alongside project manager Benn Linnell to coordinate the event. The whole thing lasted an hour. Ten photographs were taken. Vats of curry generously cooked by neighbours were wolfed down and followed by rounds of drinks at the Social Club. The negative was enlarged and the final print allowed for a view into every window. Despite its history of being portrayed as uncompromising and bleak, in this photograph Balfron Tower is majestic and futuristic still, as it glows with its people beneath a velvety bruised sky. For a while afterwards, the view from the balcony looked different to Simon. Something had changed, but he was still there in the tower and from his home on the 21st floor he looked out towards the photograph of Balfron, four yards away.

1 J.G. Ballard, High-Rise (1975), London: Harper Perennial, 2006, p.7

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Texts pp 7, 9,10,13 - One thousand emails sent and received during the making of the project, selections cut up and arranged by Chantal Faust.

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