4 Living Together in the Vertical City?

4.1 Vertical City, Part One

What most annoyed Wilder about life in the apartment building was the way in which an apparently homogeneous collection of academics and high-income freelancers had split into three distinct and hostile camps. The old social divisions based on power, capital and self-interest had reasserted themselves here as everywhere else.

In fact, the skyscraper had already divided itself into the three classic social groups – lower, middle and upper class. The shopping mall on the tenth floor formed a clear boundary between the lower nine floors, with their proletariat of film technicians, stewardesses, and the like, and the middle section of the high-rise, which stretched from the tenth floor to the swimming pool and restaurant floor on the thirty-fifth. These middle two-thirds of the apartment building constituted its middle class, composed of self-centered but essentially docile members of academic professions – doctors and lawyers, accountants and tax specialists who were not freelancers but worked for medical institutions and large corporations. Puritanical and disciplined as they were, they had the cohesion of those who eagerly settle for second best.

Above them, on the top five floors of the high-rise, was the upper class, the discreet oligarchy, made up of smaller captains of industry and entrepreneurs, television actresses and careerist academics, with express elevators, better utilities and carpeted staircases. They set the tone in the building. It was their complaints that were taken care of first, and they subtly ruled life in the high-rise, deciding when children could use the swimming pools and the rooftop play garden, setting the menu in the restaurant and the high prices that kept almost everyone but them out of there. Above all, it was their sophisticated patronage that kept the middle class in line, that constant lure of friendship and recognition (Ballard 2016 [1975]: 73 f.).

In these almost satirical words, British author J. G. Ballard, in his 1975 novel *High-Rise*, has his character Richard Wilder, an increasingly angry resident of

the "lower floors," television journalist and aspiring documentary film director[32] pass judgment on the question of social cohesion in the novel's titular *High-Rise* (1975). In this fifth chapter, titled "The Vertical City," the impending escalation of vandalism, intensified class-based segregation, and brutal violence among the residents is already beginning to take shape, but its monstrous scale is hardly imaginable after this first third of the novel. It begins, as it often does, with a dispute among neighbors, in this case over the use of a swimming pool, which unleashes a never-ending nightmare in this forty-story residential tower on the outskirts of London.

At the top of this high-rise resides the highly narcissistic architect Anthony Royal. Up to 2,000 residents were to move into their condominiums and, thanks to the latest technology, infrastructure and various amenities, in a position to leave the high-rise whenever they felt like it. When the dystopian violence can no longer be contained, but many residents nevertheless – or especially in view of the war-like situation and gathering of ever smaller groups – feel such an intense energy for life as probably never before in their lives, this case actually occurs: many hardly leave the high-rise anymore, not even to go to work. It is not improbable that J. G. Ballard thus deliberately caricatured and smashed with relish the notion of a *unité d'habitation* and bringing together of 'all of life under one roof,' a concept associated in particular with the influential architect Le Corbusier. Perhaps Ballard even had the larger social connection between growing social inequality, intensified class-based demarcation, and a de-democratization fostered by the authoritarian understanding of planning in urban development clearly in mind when he wrote this novel, which lacks the idea of an active participation of the future inhabitants.[33]

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32   An interesting aspect of this is how Ballard has his protagonist Wilder reflect on the medium of documentary film as well as its multiple forms and functions:

"To bring his neighbors together, Wilder needed something that would give them a strong sense of identity. Documentary film would do that perfectly, moreover, in a form they could understand. The film would dramatize all their resentments and expose how utilities and other facilities were abused by the upstairs residents. It might even be necessary to secretly stir up trouble, to exaggerate the tensions present in the high-rise.

As Wilder soon discovered, however, the form of his documentary was already about to be fixed" (p. 75, translated from the German version of the novel).

33   In his essay for the exhibition volume *Die Neue Heimat (1950–1982). Eine sozialdemokratische Utopie und ihre Bauten* ("The Neue Heimat [1950–1982]. A social-democratic utopia and its buildings") (2019, eds. Andres Lepik and Hilde Strobl), Oliver Schwedes describes how Le Corbusier's authoritarian understanding of urban planning was transformed into an urban model, due to a generalization of industrial mass production in the postwar period combined with welfare-state centralization and regulation in urban design. This model

Fig. 3. Verticality as an ordering principle? To this day, New York is the epitome of the vertical city and an urban model for other cities worldwide. View from one of the city's latest attractions: the 437-meter tall One Vanderbuilt, advertised as the the tallest commercial skyscraper in Midtown Manhattan and one of the 30 tallest buildings in the world. Source: photograph by author, 2023.

After reading the novel *High-Rise*, the extremely violent images lingered for a long time in my mind and I have not yet felt the desire to watch the film of the same name, which was made several years later, on the basis of J. G. Ballard's book, and released in 2015, a full forty years after its first publication. The novel dates from a time when skepticism about skyscrapers, especially when they were residential rather than office towers, was at an all-time high. In the western part of Germany, where I grew up, criticism of this form of housing construction and the urban planning linked with it, which at that time was not yet geared to profit maximization, had found a much-cited expression in the formulation chosen by the physician and psychoanalyst Alexander Mitscherlich for his 1965 pamphlet "Die Unwirtlichkeit unserer Städte. Anstiftung zum Unfrieden" ("The Inhospitability of Our Cities: Incitement to Unrest"):

> Cram the employee behind the uniformed glass facades then also into the uniformed monotony of the apartment blocks, and one has created a condition that makes any planning for democratic freedom illusory (Mitscherlich 1996 [1965]: 52) (translated from the German original version of the text).

Shortly before the novel *High-Rise* was published, the UNI-Center in Cologne (architect: Werner Ingendaay), one of the tallest high-rise residential (or mixed use) buildings in Europe to date, was opened in 1973. Here, the proximity to the city (a so-called 'high-rise center') was consciously given more weight by the planners than an environment with green spaces, as they had often been built for newly emerging urban settlements on the outskirts or outside the cities. Nevertheless, the UNI-Center was not really an 'urban success' and, especially in its initial phase, considered hostile to families and especially children, due to the lack of amenities and prevailing anonymity. Today, the building is described with the usual German terms such as 'Bausünde' (building sin) and 'Bauklotz'

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prevailed over competing lines of tradition and, as a consequence, dominated building and planning in the Western world.

As Schwedes writes:

"Nevertheless, Corbusier had the right intuition when he saw in the fascist regimes in particular those forms of organization that corresponded to his planning ideas. After all, National Socialism had also significantly prepared the implementation of Fordism in the post-war period. The bundling of the largest housing cooperatives under the umbrella of the Hamburg Neue Heimat as well as its hierarchically organized and centrally managed development in the context of the German Federation of trade unions in the postwar period had their roots in the National Socialist era, just as decisive ideas of forced industrial housing construction and essential conceptual urban planning considerations in the postwar period were fed from that period" (p. 21 f.) (translated from the German original version of the essay).

(concrete block), but on the other hand, questions of monument protection as well as the preservation and renewal of existing living space to solve the so-called new housing question in German cities are now also changing the view of residential towers such as the UNI-Center.

Against this background, newly developed neighborhoods such as Darmstadt-Kranichstein, which were created in the course of the construction of high-rise housing estates by the non-profit building and housing company Neue Heimat (NH) in the postwar era[34] and have long been viewed with suspicion as 'social hotspots' or 'ghettos,' are currently being reconsidered. However, the stigmatization of 'satellite towns', as it also became increasingly prevalent with regard to East German prefabricated housing estates in the period after reunification in the 1990s and 2000s, cannot be overcome so easily, even if many developments in the high-rise housing estates have in fact already taken a positive turn.

As a child of the 1970s who grew up in West Germany, I was particularly familiar with high-rise buildings that were built for less privileged groups in southern Germany as well as for the so-called *Aussiedler* (German immigrants from Eastern European countries). A then prevailing, deeply classist and disparaging view of these high-rises and the people living in them was expressed for me exemplarily in the term "Assis". "Assi" is the short form of the term "Asoziale" ("asocials"). During the Nazi era used the terms 'asocial' and 'workshy' to categorize together a group of people who did not conform to their social norms. It puzzled me throughout my youth how ubiquitous this expression was. (Re)engaging more intensively with the discourses and politics surrounding the construction of residential towers from a transregional-comparative perspective today is undoubtedly related to this formative experience, but also my astonishment at how little public presence the history and present of high-rise housing estates currently has.

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34   Neue Heimat was reestablished as a union enterprise after the Second World War, continuing a history of union housing construction in West Germany dating back to the Weimar Republic. In the following decades, it developed into a major supraregional corporation that enjoyed broad political and societal support. However, the extent of corruption within the management level only became publicly visible as a result of the financial bankruptcy and subsequent breakup of the group.

Hilde Strobl speaks in the book accompanying the exhibition *Die Neue Heimat (1950–1982). Eine sozialdemokratische Utopie und ihre Bauten* ("The Neue Heimat [1950–1982]. A social-democratic utopia and its buildings," edited by Andres Lepik and Hilde Strobl, 2019), of a "shock for the West German population" (p. 9). Only in recent years has there been an increased reconsideration and examination of the history of the Neue Heimat, spurred not least by the discussion of affordable housing in Germany.

After the Second World War, the Neue Heimat, at times the largest housing construction company in Europe, played a major role in the reconstruction project. Between 1947 and 1985, the non-profit organization built hundreds of thousands of housing units throughout the Federal Republic of Germany. Today, they still characterize the face of many west German cities. For instance, the architect and urban planner Ernst May, who was head of the planning department of Neue Heimat in Hamburg from 1954 to 1961, was commissioned by the city of Darmstadt (near Frankfurt on the Main in the federal state of Hesse) in 1965 to take over the planning for Kranichstein, a satellite town with 18,000 inhabitants and all kinds of community facilities.

In Luetten Klein (Rostock), however, which was presented as a 'model city of the future' in the German Democratic Republic Erich Kaufmann, one of the outstanding architects of the GDR, was responsible for a series of residential projects and large housing estates in Rostock. He was mainly in charge of prefabricated buildings, including the 18-storey high-rise buildings in Luetten Klein. At record speed, 10,000 apartments were built within just ten years (mid-1960s to mid-1970s). This was made possible by the prefabricated slab construction method. Not only apartments were built here – leisure facilities, restaurants, department stores, polyclinics and even a tram line were planned from the beginning.[35]

Maintaining what already exists through conversion, repair or retrofitting measures and improving living together in high-rise buildings, for example through more opportunities for co-design, offers for residents, as well as the creation of communal spaces inside the buildings, is an approach and emerging perspective that various architecture exhibitions are currently trying to support and communicate. For instance, the exhibition "Architecture Now: New York, New Publics" (The Museum of Modern Art, 2023) argued for the improvement of housing blocks and their grounds while keeping the communities they house in place. The design strategies have come out of multiple community workshops organized with tenants of the New York Housing Authority (NYCHA). As a project description in the exhibition mentioned, "(o)ne in sixteen New Yorkers lives in public housing units owned and managed by the NYCHA. Many of its complexes are in need of routine maintenance and costly repairs, often after decades of neglect." Challenging previous recommendations to demolish entire campuses and start from scratch,

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35   The sociologist Steffen Mau grew up in Lütten Klein in the 1970s. In his famous book titled *Lütten Klein. Leben in der ostdeutschen Transformationsgesellschaft* ("Lütten Klein. Life in the East-German Transformative Society," 2019), Mau takes the high-rise estate as a starting point for his investigation of the social upheavals and developments since the fall of the Wall.

critical architects and urban designers advocate for "scalable design solutions" and for the preservation of existing buildings.[36]

Nevertheless, skepticism about expectations of neighborly cohesion in residential towers or a sense of community in high-rise housing estates remains widespread – interestingly, regardless of whether they were built for less privileged or particularly privileged social groups. For representatives of the latter viewpoint, J.B. Ballard's novel is therefore still valid today as a timeless reference and is cited once again in the context of recent high-rise discussions. On the one hand, by critical observers who, in view of a new global enthusiasm and wave of high-rise residential construction which has been evident for several years now, express their fundamental doubts about the possibility of residential cohesion in high-rises. On the other hand, also by architectural journalists such as Dirk Meyhoefer, who considers the construction of a high-rise building to be the dream of every (male) architect:

> Every architect would like to design a church, a theater or a high-rise sculpture one day. I've never actually heard an architect say 'no' when asked if he'd like to build a high-rise.

This is how Meyhoefer puts it in his 2022 Deutschlandfunk feature "Hochhäuser, Megahäuser, High Rises. Zwischen Himmel und Erde" ("Skyscrapers, Megahouses, High Rises. Between Heaven and Earth") and he also reproduces the idea of the skyscraper as a masculine symbol of "power, sex and property" as well as a "metaphysical transit space" in which people allegedly not only want to reach high, but also "seek to be close to heaven", which alludes to a (monotheistic) religious connotation (ibid.).[37]

For media reports, novels and feature films, the image of the 'starchitect' planning and building 'visionary' heights may be particularly appropriate, and ultimately it is once again primarily about the question of conquering space and outdoing each other in terms of built height.

However, especially in the field of residential construction, this common image regarding the supposed high-rise ambition belies, on the one hand, the fact

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36   From a similar perspective, the exhibition "The Great Repair" at Akademie der Künste in Berlin (Oct 2023 – Jan 2024) reflects on new strategies to reduce resource consumption and preserve and repair what already exists.

37   Interestingly, on April 7, 2023, *Fox News* showed a photo which had been taken on April 5, 1965, and proudly mentioned how "(o)n Good Friday years ago, NYC skyscrapers lit up with crosses and showed a nation that embraced faith: Buildings with lighted crosses to honor Good Friday in April 1956." Left to right: 60 Wall Tower, 20 Exchange Place (formerly known as City Bank Farmers Trust Co.) and 40 Wall Street. Photo taken on April 5, 1956. (Ed Peters/NY Daily News Archive via Getty Images; Kerry J. Byrne, *Fox News*, April 7, 2023).

that a number of architects actually position themselves very critically vis-à-vis the question, or perhaps rather, the standard catalog of 'rational' sounding arguments in favor of residential towers, first and foremost with regard to the question of space that can supposedly be solved by them. I will discuss Charles Correa's position on this question below as an example. Moreover, the role of architects in housing construction is anything but central, as is mentioned in the introduction to this book. In view of their negligible share in the entire world's built environment, it could even be considered downright 'marginal' (Tauber 2014: 44).

In the era before profit-oriented urban planning, Alexander Mitscherlich had already identified this as a potential consequence of authoritarian planning and criticized it in clear terms:

> If today large housing development companies, wherever possible with the exclusion of architects, urban planners, not to mention social psychologists and psychoanalysts, but with the help of hired technicians, set about to create living space, then we have here that fatal touch of extremes, which will remain a human fate as long as we do not see through its origin by a change of our critical attitude. The extremes that meet here: the desire to provide everyone with a dwelling worthy of human beings is effectively nullified by the fact that an environment is created for all which does not allow a social engagement to arise at all (Mitscherlich 1965).

Towards the end of his above-mentioned radio feature for Deutschlandfunk, even architectural journalist Dirk Meyhoefer concedes that in the new global competition for the most spectacular high-rises, it is no longer so centrally about the figure and role of the architect:

> Superlatives require extremely good knowledge of materials and construction processes. The latter must be precisely coordinated and networked. It is increasingly a question of safety and security. And the architect is moving into the background.
> More and more, the high-rise is now becoming the task of economists, lawyers and other professions. And for architects, it's no longer so much a question of the big idea, but of sustainability. For architects like Werner Sobek[38], sustainability today is also a moral obligation (Meyhoefer 2022).

While in Germany, on the one hand, the question of how to deal with the existing high-rise buildings and residential towers as well as the construction of new high-rises is being debated, in countries such as India, a very rapid development

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38   Werner Sobek is a structural engineer and architect who is known for his long-standing commitment for sustainable construction and design.

has already taken place in recent decades, especially in the area of residential high-rises for the wealthy (Patel 2017). While J. G. Ballard's high-rise comprised 40 floors, in Indian metropolitan regions and cities such as Mumbai, Hyderabad, Kolkata, Bengaluru, Noida and Gurgaon (to mention only a few), several supertall skyscrapers / towers have already been built, which comprise between 50 and 80 floors. Surprisingly, however, academic research on the question of living together in residential high-rises is still limited (which is not only true in the case of India). A large part of the academic literature seems to be primarily concerned with safety issues in relation to fire, earthquakes or strong winds as well as with questions of energy supply and sustainability of the building materials. An exception is the research of Soumi Muhuri and Sanghamitra Basu who investigated the relationship between interactional spaces and social cohesion in high-rise group housing complexes in Kolkata and address the question of quantitative measurability of residential cohesion in their publications (Muhuri / Basu 2021 and 2018).

In noting that elevators tend to inhibit communication in high-rise apartment buildings and that there is a widespread lack of open communal spaces, these observations differ little from the international discussion. For instance, in another feature produced for the Deutschlandfunk radio station, broadcast on April 19, 2020, the author Maximilian Schoenherr states:

> The elevator as a communication barrier. Numerous studies in recent years have dealt with social coexistence in the city. High-rise buildings play a subordinate role in these studies. A classic on living in high-rise buildings is a book published 50 years ago by urban sociologist Ulfert Herlyn.[39] Herlyn questioned things that high-rise architects considered God-given, such as elevators. He found that the elevator impedes communication on individual floors. With a door that can open at any time, a quiet conversation between two neighbors becomes impossible. The elevator door as a symbol of acceleration and hurriedness: impatient waiting, glances at the floor, and when the elevator finally arrives, get in and leave. Today, elevators are built more transparently, often in their own towers and glazed (translated from the German original text) (Schoenherr 2020).

The same article also quotes Eveline Althaus from the ETH Zurich Housing Forum, who has conducted research and published on the "social space of high-rise

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39 The article here refers to Ulfert Herlyn's 1970 book *Wohnen im Hochhaus. Eine empirisch-soziologische Untersuchung in ausgewählten Hochhäusern der Städte München, Stuttgart, Hamburg und Wolfsburg* ("Living in a high-rise. An empirical-sociological study in selected high-rise buildings in the cities of Munich, Stuttgart, Hamburg and Wolfsburg"). Stuttgart: Krämer.

buildings" in Switzerland.[40] She mentions the example of a newly built high-rise in Zurich by a housing cooperative, "where they deliberately want to create open communal spaces on the mezzanines, starting with the stairwells" (ibid.). Interestingly, in this article, too, the construction of high-rise buildings is considered by some of the interviewed experts to be almost "without alternative", in view of the scarcity of space.

This often repeated and rarely questioned standard reference to a 'lack of space' or an achievable urban housing density by building in heights, which is meanwhile assumed to be self-explanatory, was already questioned by Charles Correa in 2010 in his lecture "India: High Rise & High Density," which he held at the conference of the Council of Tall Buildings and Urban Habitat (CUBTH) in Mumbai. Correa began this talk by explaining, first of all, that the high density of housing in Indian cities is not due to the large number of high-rise buildings, but can be explained mainly by the high average number of people who have to share a room or an apartment. Particularly in poorer sections of society, this can be up to 10 people per room. Secondly, unlike in major European cities, for example, the majority of high-rises in India are mainly office towers rather than residential towers, even though significantly more of the latter were to be built at the time, as they were being traded as a solution to the shortage of space and housing in cities in view of the scarcity of land. This was the situation when Correa made his presentation in 2010 and, in fact, it can currently be seen that the development he had anticipated has been consistently followed in subsequent years. However, in addition to the aforementioned residential towers for affluent populations, two other developments are important to consider here: first, an increasing number of so-called supertall skyscrapers of *mixed use*, that is, part commercial and part residential, and second, high-rises built as part of 'slum rehabilitation schemes', often on the outskirts of cities or in remote areas. These will be the subject of the next section of this essay, in which I present the documentary *Vertical City* by Avijit Mukul Kishore (2011). Correa was extremely critical of this development, not only with regard to India or Mumbai, but cities worldwide, where this form of "ugly multi-storey concrete tenement slums" were built on behalf of government organizations. To him, these high-rise towers for the poor were "really the work of pessimists. What they are saying is: we don't have any future" (Correa 2012: 202).

However, in his CUBTH lecture, Correa uses the example of Mumbai to primarily question the basic assumption or rhetoric regarding "saving space" through residential density in height. He explains that plans focusing on housing only

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40 Eveline Althaus (2018). *Sozialraum Hochhaus. Nachbarschaft und Wohnalltag in Schweizer Großwohnbauten* ("The High-Rise as Social Space. Neighborhood and Everyday Living in Swiss Large Apartment Buildings"). Bielefeld: transcript.

often neglect important factors such as the availability of transportation – unless the planning relies solely on automobility and the availability of enough parking space – and other infrastructures that are important for living and working in the city. This also requires space, which is often not taken into consideration. In addition, it is very important to consider that a minimum area per residential unit for amenities must also be taken into account, such as educational facilities for children or green and recreational areas per person within reach of the residential area. As a consequence, Correa sees the central problem in the fact that in cities like Mumbai, the few free building areas are nevertheless built up with residential buildings according to the same logic as would be pursued for the construction of very closely standing office towers in large cities worldwide, that is, without all the additionally required areas for amenities which potentially enable residents to realize the important difference between 'residing' and "being at home." Or, as Mitscherlich puts it, the "art of being at home (…) cannot be thought of as limited to residential culture in the narrower sense" (Mitscherlich 1996 [1965]: 12).

4.2 Vertical City, Part Two

> *Old cities had a heart. The heartlessness, the inhospitality of*
> *the new construction, however, has a weighty excuse on its side: the taboo*
> *of ownership of land in the cities, which makes any creative redesign impossible*
> (Mitscherlich 1996 [1965]: 24) (translated from the German original version).

The 34-minute documentary *Vertical City* by director Avijit Mukul Kishore was funded by the Public Service Broadcasting Trust (PSBT) and released in 2011; it is freely available on various digital platforms (see figure 4). The film highlights the daily life and coexistence of former slum dwellers, particularly from the informal settlement Jari Mari in the vicinity of Mumbai's international airport, who have been resettled under the government's Slum Rehabiliation Program or have chosen to move into one of the available apartments in the new high-rise buildings being built for low-income groups.[41] For the implementation of this program,

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41   Documentary filmmaker Surabhi Sharma published her film about Jari Mari in 2001 under the title *Jari Mari: Of Cloth and Other Stories.* The threatening destruction of the informal settlement and livelihoods on site were already the subject of her film at that time. In the description on her home page, it says: "Jari Mari is a sprawling slum colony near Mumbai's international airport Chhatrapati Shivaji. Its narrow alleys house hundreds of small sweatshops where women and men work without the right to organize. Their existence is on the line – their illegal dwellings could be demolished by airport authorities at any moment, and they have to look for work every day, from workshop to workshop. The film explores the lives of the people of Jari Mari and documents the many changes in
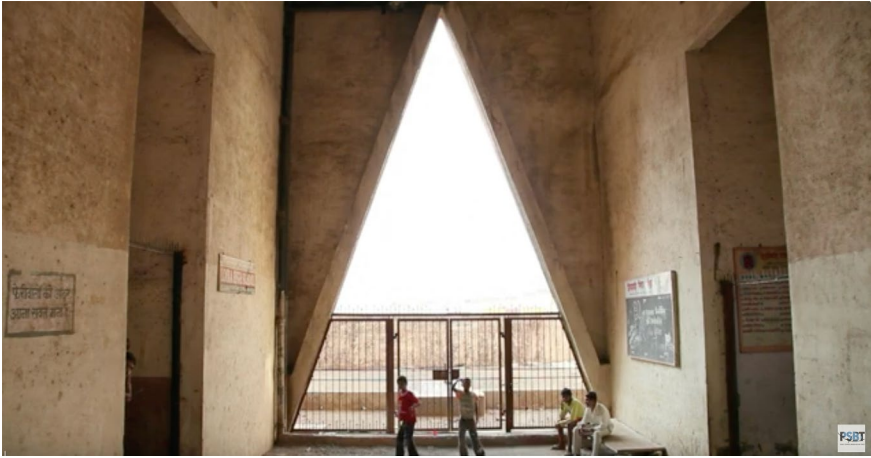
Fig. 4. Still from the film *Vertical City* (dir. Avijit Mukul Kishore, 2011).

different actors from politics, administration, construction industry and civil society have come together and formed an unexpected 'coalition' that, according to one commentator in *Vertical City*, "should not belong together": the state, local NGOs, international organizations such as the World Bank, and construction companies that are being promised coveted low-cost land for lucrative building projects, often on the site of previous informal settlements, provided they agree to build high-rise projects to house former slum dwellers in return. Essentially, it is therefore a 'by-product' of their core business, which is "to make high end real estate available and profit from it" (08:39 min).

> The slum rehabilitation schemes are executed in partnerships with private builders who are given major incentives for providing free housing. For every house provided, the builder is granted twice the amount of floor space index to develop and sell at commercial rates (05:46 min).

Although the critical perspective of the director as well as the experts he interviewed for the film (critical architects, urban researchers and activists) and residents of the high-rise buildings predominate and are clearly conveyed, *Vertical City* at least leaves room for one account of a positive experience of a person who sees an improvement for his life and survival in Mumbai by moving into the high-rise housing estate (and leaving it again). In the following, I will discuss

the nature and organization of Mumbai's workforce over the past two decades." The film can be viewed online at https://surabhisharma.wordpress.com/filmography/jari-mari-of-cloth-and-other-stories/ (last access Jan 3, 2024).

both perspectives, the hopeful as well as the deeply disappointed one, in more detail on the basis of the presented film sequences and, at the same time, include important supplementary perspectives from an ethnographic study conducted by Ramya Ramanath, which is focuses in particular on the experiences of girls and women in these high-rise housing estates for poorer sections of society. I also consider this important as we predominantly hear men speak about their own as well as their' families' experiences in the film, with a few exceptions.

A special feature of the film *Vertical City* is that Kishore has consistently refrained from showing the faces of the people speaking, so that as viewers, we can immerse ourselves in the images and scenes shown, while at the same time hearing the voices, testimonials or comments on the situation shown. At several points in the film, sequences from earlier documentaries and newsreels by the Films Division of India (FDI) are inserted to illustrate the state's prevailing view of the slums in Bombay / Mumbai and their inhabitants (see chapter 2 on "Low-cost housing for the people – as projected by the Films Division of India [FDI]"). Electronic sound is used sparingly for the background and reinforces a feeling of unease in the scenes for which it is used; otherwise, as mentioned, the reports and classifications of the interviewees can be heard, as well as the everyday sounds of an entire day in the high-rise housing estate, which *Vertical City* seems to show in only 34 minutes.

Even more than ten years after its release, the film has lost none of its topicality and offers an excellent access and introduction to the question of affordable housing and living (together) in the vertical city, which is why the film is presented here in more detail. It should be mentioned in this context that there is no shortage of highly critical, and in some cases independently funded, documentaries dealing with the destruction of slums in major Indian cities and the repeated displacement of less privileged or marginalized groups. An early milestone in this regard, which has both stirred and inspired many subsequent directors, is Anand Pathwardan's film *Bombay, Our City /* हमारा शहर.[42] However, critical or (self-)reflective *architectural* perspectives on the question of affordable housing, including an examination of construction methods, spatial design, the building materials used, as well as the possibilities for residents of 'dwelling' (Rahul Mehrotra) or 'being at home' (Alexander Mitscherlich), which form the specific focus of this book, are less frequently addressed in documentaries. Even rarer so far are documentary films which deal with everyday life and living together in high-rise buildings. In

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42 Patwardhan makes the Hindi versions of his documentaries available via YouTube, while the English subtitled / synchronized versions are only available via DVD through his website. हमारा शहर / *Bombay Our City* (1984) can be accessed online at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JEIX36rbIJM (last access Jan 3, 2024).

view of an ongoing high-rise building boom in Indian cities, I found this rather surprising, but hope that more documentaries will deal with this important topic in depth in the coming years.[43]

Kishore's film begins with a five-minute prologue in which we are first introduced to the high-rise housing estate, its residents, and the steep staircases that are repeatedly shown in *Vertical City*. Their condition needs no explicit explanation; the building material itself appears damaged and heavily soiled, the staircases endless and worn. In clear contrast to this are the extremely well-maintained, small interiors of the apartments, which are also briefly shown in the first few minutes and are furnished according to the disposable income of the residents. Overall, the materiality of the building already illustrates in these first minutes of the film that the housing estate is in a very bad condition.

Another form of high-rise dystopia, which unfolds in J. G. Ballard's novel through the rampant vandalism of the apartment owners in the residential tower, seems to prevail here solely due to the bad quality of the construction, design and building materials used for the high-rise shown here, without any further intervention by humans. The experts, whose voices we now hear, are not introduced by name, since Kishore apparently decided to present only what they say on this and let it have its effect on the viewers:

> It is shockingly scary; it is scary that anything can be imagined that is actually completely legal – there is nothing illegal about it (01:39 min).

> The State's view of the poor is essentially that they are dispensable (01:44 min).

> These are not nice places to be in in the city (01:50 min).

> It is not clear what is the purpose of these slum rehabilitation schemes (03:24 min).

A former resident of Jari Mari tells us how overjoyed he and his family had been at first about the news of getting an apartment here and what high hopes they had in terms of educational opportunities and later job prospects for their children.

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43   A documentary produced for Deutsche Welle which has been viewed more than 5 million times on YouTube alone is the film *Megacity Mumbai – From slums to skyscrapers*, released in 2021. It should also be mentioned that apart from the Public Service Broadcasting Trust (PSBT) and a few others, there are not many funding options for critical documentary filmmakers in India. Nevertheless, documentary filmmaking continues to thrive in India and gets more and more recognition worldwide. Co-funding and international collaborations are one way which proves particularly successful for contemporary documentary filmmakers from India.

Fig. 5. Still from the film *Vertical City* (dir. Avijit Mukul Kishore, 2011).

Their aspirations were dashed very soon after they moved into the apartment, and we also learn in minutes 09:00 and 10:00 of the film why:

> People were shifted in a big hurry, without even completing the basic infra-structure. There's no way to get out of the community at all – no vehicles could come up to the location (09:53 min).

There is a lack of traffic connections and affordable transportation, the high-rise housing estate is located so far outside of any connection that the residents are effectively isolated and, as a consequence, also eventually lose their jobs and regular income:

> As a result, they have lost their jobs, they have lost their livelihoods which they are not able to bear (10:13 min).

In this context, it is also mentioned that it is hardly comprehensible why the "most vulnerable communities" were the first to be relocated from the slums without first being given access to "rehabilitation measures" on the spot.

The serious repercussions for life in the high-rise housing estate are illustrated by the two examples of water supply and the non-functioning elevators. From minute 05:00 onwards, we see children and adults hurriedly running around the courtyard with their water containers, transporting fresh water to their apartments as quickly as possible; children take the opportunity to shower at the same time. For days, the water supply is sometimes interrupted, as we learn, and for elderly single people living on the higher floors, it is extremely tedious and difficult to carry the water all the way up the stairs to their apartments (12:36 min). Everything

works only by climbing stairs, because even the elevators do not work in the high-rise building shown and, according to one resident, they actually never did at any given time:

> They have been reduced to junk with then years of disuse. We have no illusion of ever being able to use them (10:00 min).

Similar to this film, Ramya Ramanath also reports in her book titled *A Place to Call Home. Women as Agents of Change in Mumbai* (2019), which is based on extensive ethnographic research in one of the largest 'resettlement sites in Asia', the high-rise Sangharsh Nagar (Chandivali) settlement in Mumbai, of the severe disruption to daily life caused by poor electricity and water supply in the high-rise buildings. Ramanath describes very vividly in her book why this is in many cases a clear deterioration for residents compared to their previous housing situation in informal settlements, using the community-based or neighborhood-based self-organized provision of basic amenities such as water, electricity and sanitation in Mumbai's Sanjay Gandhi National Park, from which many residents had moved to the ambitious 'flagship' Sangharsh Nagar resettlement project. She explains:

> As in other slums across urban India, networks of 30 to 40 migrant households formed to obtain basic amenities such as water, electricity, and sanitation. Residents pooled their financial resources to purchase electricity through an informal service provider who illegally tapped into an overhead electrical line or a distribution feeder using cables. Over time, residents in the park's lower elevations organized themselves in *chaalis* to qualify as collectives entitled to municipal water connections and toilets. The formation of groups among proximate homes was a prevalent means to create more habitable accommodations (Ramanath 2019: 149).

However, this neighborly cohesion and self-organization is rendered more difficult or hardly possible by the architecture of the high-rise buildings. In addition to the lack of infrastructure and basic amenities, the new high-rise residents have to pay many fees on a regular basis and also municipal taxes. Without a regular income and in view of the rising cost of living, they can hardly pay these and accordingly fear being kicked out again at any time.

It is not surprising, therefore, that this can lead to an assessment that the residents were better off in the slum:

> How will people who don't have enough to eat pay any maintenance charges? How far will the 200 rupees per room go to pay the expenses towards lighting or water, sanitation or tax? (21:25 min).

> Even if all the members of a family work, they can barely make ends meet. One can't survive on bricks and mortar alone. So, people moved back into the slums, close to where they find work (22:08 min).

Against this background, the impression of some experts is reinforced that this reha-bilitation program of the Slum Rehabilitation Authority actually contributes more to the expansion of slums than to their reduction (22:26 min). However, the authority has learned little from these experiences and an improvement for the residents, if any, will only occur when the high-rise housing projects for wealthy groups – in the immediate vicinity of the high-rise housing developments for the poor, in this case in the neighboring Mantri Park – are completed and the necessary infrastructure and amenities, which are denied to the disadvantaged and marginalized groups, have to be ensured for them. Accordingly, as one resident puts it: "We got in charity what was rightfully ours. Change comes about only after the big people move in" (25:32 min).

The only more positive assessment of his own situation and future prospects after or even due to the (multiple) relocation(s) within Mumbai, as indicated above, is told by a man who introduces himself as a carpenter and interior decorator. He describes how, after his arrival in the city, he initially shared a rented room with five other workers and during this time always had 2–3 different jobs on hand to build up savings. Once the money he had saved was enough for him to take a loan and then buy his first apartment in Tata Colony in Mumbai for 150,000 IRS, he moved and lived in it for 9 years. So it continued with selling and buying new apartments until he was able to sublet his place and move to a chawl[44] instead where he still lived at the time of the interview for *Vertical City* (18:47 min).

Since the film *Vertical City* looks very sensitively at the situation of the children, but perhaps less carefully at gendered im/mobilities and its relation to architecture and urban planning, it makes sense at this point to once again include a comparative perspective from Ramya Ramanath's ethnographic research in Sang-harsh Nagar, because her focus is specifically on the decision-making power and agency of women after moving from the slum to the newly constructed high-rise housing estate. Whereas in *Vertical City*, one interlocutor lamented the fact that nearly all his family members would now have to continuously engage in wage labor in order to afford the cost of living and additional expenses in the high-rise, Ramanath highlights how many of the girls and women she interviewed for her study were in fact very eager

> (t)o join the labor market and begin contributing to the financial welfare of their households. The risks that women are taking, often bolstered by new familial or social support, and the pride they display in their efforts – run-ning grocery stores from their ground-floor windows, grinding grain from their extended verandas, hawking goods in the roads within and around the resettlement site (Ramanath 2019: 137).

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44   Chawls are large tenements in Indian cities that are divided into many separate apart-ments and provide(d) cheap, basic housing for industrial workers.

As long as they do not have access to savings accounts or formal lending, women establish local informal groups and networks, known as *bishis*, within which they can save money and borrow it as needed for their entrepreneurial investments. Like the formation of other neighborhood associations, such as youth *mandals* or *mahila mandals* (youth or women's circles), Ramanath describes *bishis* as a practice which had first emerged in the informal settlements, not in the high-rise housing estate. In Sangharsh Nagar, on the other hand, she was able to observe that the question of religious, regional and caste identity now played a much greater role in these network or group formations and worked particularly well among Hindu women from Maharashtra, while Muslim women, for instance, experienced much less access and opportunities for mutual support and solidarity here.

> At Sangharsh Nagar, the development of funds and bishis and the interactions among women within these spaces carried tremendous potential for building social and political capital. In effect, these funds and bishis provided women with training grounds for civic involvement and open discussion, and were forums for community mobilization.
>   But spaces for social and political engagement were not the norm. Excluded from such groupings were the Muslims, residents originally from UP, the Biharis (from the state of Bihar) and the other non-Maharashtrian women who called Sangharsh Nagar home. (…) But the move to Sangharsh Nagar had brought other forms of pride and empowerment to some, spurring them into employment they wouldn't have considered otherwise (Ramanath 2019: 120).

Without claiming that all the different communities had previously "lived more peaceably amidst each other than they did at the resettlement site" in the informal settlement in Sanjay Gandhi Park (Ramanath 2019: 150), the markedly different spatial configuration there would nevertheless have enabled a "sense of place" among them and the sharing of resources and utilities in a city where all of them were not welcomed with open arms as new arrivals. This was not the case in Sangharsh Nagar or any other resettlement site due to the spatial separation, the vertical living (instead of on the same level) and a general sense of insecurity as well as lack of safety outside their homes, which was strongly felt by girls and women in particular, as there was a fundamental lack of opportunities for "place-based interaction" through which participatory spaces could emerge (ibid.).

> When women are allowed room to reshape and expand the terms of their own empowerment and the use of their environment, then newer types of spaces emerge, spaces that seek to recreate the spirit of place through relationships they crave (Ramanath 2019: 151).

Without glossing over their difficult situation, Ramanath's gender-sensitive perspective reveals the practices and – in some cases previously tried and tested – solutions that women in particular resort to in the newly constructed high-rises

for less privileged and marginalized groups, in order to bring about positive change. In a situation that Kishore's film *Vertical City* depicts as almost hopeless and stagnant, they therefore see themselves and become, in many ways, agents of change. The fact that this is hardly perceived by the public or represented in the media is drastically demonstrated, for example, by a short television report on Sangharsh Nagar for the channel NDTV from 2016. The responsibility for the poor condition of the high-rise buildings, the littering of the settlement and the generally bad situation, which stands in stark contrast to the many promises and aspirations that accompanied this (or one of the) largest resettlement project(s) in Asia, is attributed here exclusively to the residents themselves. A deep-seated classist / casteist contempt and gulf in relation to "the poor" is expressed in the words of the commentator, who speaks of the need to "educate" the residents to live in the high-rises buildings "properly", to "better maintain" the building fabric and to significantly improve the overall condition of the housing estate, so that this "vertical city does not become a vertical slum." On YouTube alone, this two and a half minute long unspeakable clip has been viewed more than 7000 times – the only comment from a user below it posted in 2022 reads, "You have hurt the people of Sangharsh Nagar."[45]

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45 See "Sangharsh Nagar: The Need to Educate Slum Dwellers," NDTV Profit Shows, 03 Nov 2016. Available online at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EQ_J9UH_rKs (last access Jan 3, 2024).