

THEME SECTION

# Tower block “failures”? High-rise anthropology

*Guest edited by Constance Smith and Saffron Woodcraft*

## Introduction

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*Constance Smith and Saffron Woodcraft*

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*Abstract:* The high-rise tower block is an ambiguous construction: a much-maligned architectural form yet a persistent symbol of modernity and aspiration. It is also a fulcrum for discourses about urban failure, broken communities, widening urban inequality, and insecurity. Recent tower block disasters, from the Grenfell Tower fire in London to high-rise collapses in Nairobi, have intensified such debates. In this introduction to the theme section, we explore “tower block failure” as both event and discourse. Engaging with scholarship on global urbanism, verticality, and failure as a generative force, we highlight the particular discursive, social, political, and material constellations of “failure” as it manifests in relation to tower blocks. We propose that exploring what failure sets in motion—following what failure does, rather than what it means—can help inform our understanding of urban transformation.

*Keywords:* cities, community, failure, global urbanism, Grenfell, tower blocks, urban, verticality

On 14 June 2017, a fire broke out in Grenfell Tower, west London, claiming the lives of 72 people and becoming the deadliest tower block disaster the United Kingdom has ever experienced. Amid the aftermath of the tragedy, the Grenfell fire reawakened a public discourse about “tower block failure” that long predates 2017, in which high-rise housing works as a fulcrum for wider discourses about “proper” forms of urban living, widening urban inequality and

insecurity, and the political economy of the city (Hanley 2012; see Woodcraft, this issue). Though Grenfell has recently been in the foreground of such discourses, London is far from alone in experiencing devastating tower block failures: on the day before the fire, a tower block collapsed in Nairobi, the capital of Kenya (see Smith, this issue), and cities as diverse as Mumbai, Rio de Janeiro, Istanbul, Marseille, Miami, and Dhaka have all experienced fatal high-rise



and structural failures in recent years. These disasters have animated important questions about the injustices of neoliberal city governance, the neglect of low-income housing in favor of high-profile urban developments, the use of inappropriate or poor-quality construction materials, and disregard for safety regulations and planning (Chrisafis 2019; Dinkova 2019; Karim 2014).

Despite such frequent associations with failure, the form of the tower block continues to rise. Whether as spectacular skyscrapers or low-quality residential stacks, tower blocks dominate global construction trends, becoming conspicuous features of rapidly growing cities in Africa and Asia as much as in Europe and North America (Urban 2011). Rather than signifying failure, this proliferation could be seen as an indicator of the success of this architectural form (see Glendinning and Muthesius 1994). Meanwhile, “failure” in anthropology and related disciplines has become an increasingly critiqued term for its judgmental, teleological assumptions about the nonfulfillment of predefined criteria (see Abram and Weszkalnys 2013; Carroll et al. 2017). Normative perceptions of failure tend to be condemnatory, associating the word with a cessation of function or a botched conclusion, and recent scholarship has preferred instead to replace such definitions with a more open-ended perspective that foregrounds nonconformity, disobedience, or alterity (Takaragawa and Howe 2017).

Why, then, in this theme section, have we have chosen to return to the word “failure,” with all its problematic associations? For diverse reasons, and despite their ubiquity, diagnoses of failure seem to coalesce around tower blocks. These diagnoses come from diverse sources—including scholarship, journalism, urban policy, and architectural practice, as well as sometimes from tower block residents and communities—and “failure” may be deployed to identify concerns as diverse as structural instability, social fragmentation, displacement, debt, land expropriation, or abuses of power. In this theme sec-

tion, we deliberate some of the possible dynamics behind such frequent assumptions about the relationship between tower blocks and failure. What we find is that discursive representations of failure—just as much as “failure events” such as structural collapse or fire—have powerful, constituting effects: they take root and circulate in ways that cross and recross ethnographic and analytic domains. In this sense, “failure” can be both a material and a political force, shaping the sociality, politics, and materiality of our cities in important ways, from the design of future communities to economies of investment and forms of community activism.

Precisely because the specific word “failure” is evoked in relation to high-rise housing, we do not seek to replace it with less pejorative or more open-ended terminology. To displace “failure” from our analytical vocabulary, we suggest, would be to overlook its traction on and in the very communities, places, and infrastructures we seek to understand. How it is that tower blocks come to articulate notions of failure, and what such events and discourses reveal or mask about wider urban transformation, is our interest here. We follow recent anthropological work on “failed states” (Kosmatopoulos 2011) by seeking to explore failure itself as it moves across different ethnographic, discursive, and scholarly terrains. Whether as political concern, public discourse, academic category, or physical breakdown, failure is constantly identified and then put to work, setting in motion a range of effects across different urban scales and registers. By foregrounding how classifications and contestations of tower block failure operate, as well as the socio-spatial consequences of failure events, we explore how failure, far from being a conclusive verdict, can become a site of emergence from which to understand how the city takes shape.

Each of the five articles charts how a particular high-rise landscape is entangled with larger global processes, from the extractive character of frontier real estate markets, to the edifice complex of “world-class” cities, to international migration, and what a focus on “failure”—and its

social, political, and material character—might offer to analysis of such processes. In different ways, the articles explore how the proliferation of tower blocks can be ambiguous propositions, places where both potentiality and failure are contingent and relational. In the rest of this introduction, we draw attention to some features of the larger empirical and theoretical landscape of tower blocks and failure, in which our ethnographic examinations are situated.

### Anthropologies of failure

Anthropology has a long-standing ethnographic interest in how things hold together, the labor needed to maintain social and organizational order, and the possibility of change when equilibrium is ruptured (Gluckman 1963; for a more recent approach, see Gan and Tsing 2018).<sup>1</sup> More recently, moments of infrastructural breakdown have helped constitute anthropological conceptualizations of more-than-human assemblages, networked socialities, and the fragile promises of development and modernity (Anand et al. 2018; Bennett 2005; Larkin 2008). Much of this work on the generative possibility of dysfunction is in critical conversation with linear, teleological understandings of failure that tend to prevail in spheres such as economics, international development, or urban planning, where failure is commonly judged to occur when people, systems, states, or projects fail to meet pre-conceived targets or when they depart from a dominant script (Zoanni 2018). Usually characterized in negative terms, such understandings of failure are rooted in notions of unproductivity, loss, or diminishment, as the end point on a linear temporal journey from which the only answer is to start all over again. While there may be attempts to find opportunity in failure, this is usually conceived through an instrumental framework of “learning from our mistakes” (Parfitt 2012). This is typical in accounts of policy failure, for example, or in the aftermath of disasters (Birkland 2009). It is especially ap-

parent in entrepreneurship and tech-minded business, where “fail again, fail better”—a line appropriated from a Samuel Beckett character—has become axiomatic of the startup culture of Silicon Valley, where almost every venture will end in failure but is nevertheless regarded as a site for learning and further innovation (Beauman 2012).

In response to this rather instrumental approach, a nascent anthropology of failure has sought to “think failure otherwise” (Zoanni 2018: 61): defamiliarizing the term and locating it in relation to contingency, rupture, and deviance (Amin 2016; Takaragawa and Howe 2017). Rather than couching failure in negative terms, this literature proposes we move away from a binary analytic in which failure is understood as always inferior to success and instead see the possibility inherent in departing from normative terms. Rethinking failure is in this way productive, generating new forms of knowledge: “attending to and transparently reflecting on failures . . . is of vital epistemological significance” (Mattes and Dinkelaker 2019). In this light, failures to implement welfare reforms in Norway might become recast as a way to comprehend the temporalities of planning and future-making (Vike 2013), while local characterizations of disability as failure in Uganda provide a route to rethinking notions of personhood (Zoanni 2018).

New work in the anthropology of material culture has sought to take seriously the material and social implications of instances when things “do” wrong (Carroll et al. 2017). Taking as a starting point the moments where materials malfunction and objects break or perform in unexpected ways, this body of work addresses both material failure (when things misbehave) and its attendant materialities (the social and political implications of failure that become inscribed in material forms). Failure is theorized as the space where “objectification ceases to adhere”—that is, the moment where culturally-inscribed notions of what certain things, people, and systems should do are ruptured and

shift into new subject-object positions that are differently valued (Carroll et al. 2017, 2). The implication of this shift is a break in progress toward an anticipated social outcome, yet this shift does not mark an endpoint or necessarily mutual recognition that a revaluation has taken place. While these events may not always be seen in negative terms, the authors argue failure does carry a moral weight because there is an implicit devaluation in the acknowledgement that an expectation has not been met. Significantly for us here, this work theorizes the temporality of failure as multidirectional; failure moves backward as well as forward in time, meaning that failure is a notion that can be retrospectively applied as value systems change.

In particular, the state has emerged as a key strand of anthropological thinking on failure (Bøås and Jennings 2005; Kosmatopoulos 2011). Responding to a burgeoning literature in political science and foreign policy that describes failed states in terms of weak governance, loss of sovereignty, crisis, and violence, Nikolas Kosmatopoulos (2011) has proposed instead that an anthropology of “state failure” should retrace the social life of the concept of “failed states” as it is put to work. He traces the phrase across debates in scholarship and policy, as well as following its mobilizations on the ground, where it helps to shape geopolitical decision-making, international development, and financial assistance. This approach renders the term an empirical object rather than an established category and has helped shape our thinking on failure, with its potential to track a particular term as it crosses and recrosses conventional boundaries between analysis and ethnography. It goes beyond the notion of failure as “good to think with” to allow for a politically and ethically rooted project that comprehends how definitions of failure act in the world: how analytic categories can appear in ethnographic contexts, and how events such as a tower block fire can reactivate old discourses about failed architecture in ways that modulate knowledge production as well as affecting people, communities, and neighborhoods.

## Urban failure and its discontents

Despite these efforts to problematize categories of failure, to write about urban failure in regions of the world often glossed as the “Global South” is to tread a tricky path. Cities in Asia and Africa, with high levels of informality, infrastructural breakdown, and poor governance, are frequently depicted as places epitomizing urban failure. This is in part based on a long-standing notion in urban studies and related fields that the cities of Europe—and, more recently, North America—constitute the essential reference point of what a city should be like and from which urbanism elsewhere should be measured (see Sheppard et al. 2013). This work used histories of European urban forms, politics, and culture as a baseline from which to understand the challenges facing cities in the rest of the world. This has meant much urban analysis has tended to foreground crises of urban governance, breakdown of infrastructures, and the informalization of urban spaces and economies, framed in terms of political, economic, and structural failure (Nuttall and Mbembe 2008). Such narratives have been particularly pervasive in relation to African cities: from the 1990s onward, the trope of “Africa in crisis” pervaded academic and public debate, particularly around cities and governance, and the simplistic cliché of Africa as a continent of failure still casts a long shadow (see Roitman 2017).

But as disasters such as Grenfell, as well as recent building and infrastructural collapses in Marseilles, Athens, and Genoa make clear, historic European cities may no longer—if they ever did—constitute a desirable baseline: clearly, concerns about the failure of urban neighborhoods, housing design, or local governance are far from resolved. Furthermore, we are reaching a stage where the concentration of urban life is tilting away from the Global North toward other regions of the world: by 2050, two-thirds of the global population will be living in urban areas, with highest urban growth occurring in India and Africa (UN 2015). While cities in these regions undeniably face major challenges, to

simply identify failures according to normative urban ideals established elsewhere is to mask the generative heterogeneity of global urban forms, practices and networks (Amin 2016). Scholarship in urban studies and geography has expressed a need for a more “global urbanism” that examines the social infrastructures, improvisatory economies, collaboration, and tenacity that produce world cities (Robinson and Roy 2016). This global urbanism agenda is not simply about highlighting diversity, but about finding reflexive modes of urban engagement that learn from elsewhere, that decenter and reframe conceptualizations of the urban away from Euro-American orthodoxies to develop new cultures of urban theorizing (Robinson 2016).

Our return to the term failure in this theme section, which features ethnographic examples from cities across three continents, does not mean a return to some universal benchmark of urbanism (Scott and Storper 2015). Neither do we mean to imply the total systemic or structural collapse of the urban environments we are examining, or to downplay the diverse social agency, improvisational capacities, and makeshift materialities that goes into making cities around the world work. Instead, the articles contribute to calls for a more global urbanism by drawing attention not to what categories, discourses, and materialities of failure *mean*, but what they *do*—what they set in motion. For example, in Zoë Goodman’s article, there is an implicit awareness among both developers and residents of a Mombasa high-rise that tower blocks can be isolating and exclusionary; classic tropes of the “high-rise as failed form” argument that frames much of the verticality literature. In the high-rise development that Goodman examines, this isolation is mitigated by concerted attempts to create avenues for religious and social outreach beyond the high-rise itself. In this way, whether by tracing the aftermath of structural collapse (Smith), the occupation of “failed” high-rises by migrant communities (Guan), the assumption that verticality always produces distancing (Goodman) or failed so-

ciality (Tamburo), or examining how past failures are discursively reconfigured to operate in a changing policy landscape (Woodcraft), our contributions unravel some of the ways that “failure” has shaped both the ethnographic terrain of tower blocks and how we think about them analytically.

### Verticality, isolation, and urban living

High-rise housing presents a particularly rich entry point into the relationship between failure, the city, and urban transformation. Despite their seeming solidity, tower blocks have shown themselves to be a surprisingly flexible site for debates about “proper” forms of urban living and the future of the city. As social values change, so the tower block has shifted position. Working across time, as well as across different cities of the world, they materialize the promise as well as the disintegration of modernist mass housing; they have emerged as a symbol of the power of transnational capital; they stand for both social isolation and new forms of global connectivity. In this way, the tower block is an ambiguous form, its verticality bisecting the traditional two-dimensional map of the city and bringing new coordinates to questions of segregation, exclusion, and exclusivity.

Notably, the association of verticality with social isolation has had particularly powerful effects. High-rise housing is often taken to be a fundamentally failed form precisely because it is seen to promote segregated, isolating living conditions, whether for elites or lower-income residents. In his work exploring the ways that verticality is reshaping how we live on the planet, Stephen Graham describes elite high-rise housing as “vertical cocoons” (2016: 211). Removed from the rest of the populace below, gated high-rise condominiums enable wealthy urbanites to seal themselves off from the supposed disorder of the street level and to gaze down on the city from above. These privatized, vertical enclaves are both exclusive and exclusionary, indexing status and prestige, as well as preventing unde-

sirable visitors through security technologies and hostile architectures (see also Brosius 2010; Davis 1990). This linking of verticality with isolation finds an intriguing parallel with condemnations of high-rise public housing, in which the capacity of vertical towers to generate exclusion and alienation have long been central arguments (Coleman 1985; Newman 1973). Though the vertical isolation of elites is assumed to be a voluntary self-cocooning, while the isolation of public tower block residents is taken as a form of state-sanctioned segregation in “sink estates,” in both narratives high-rise living is presumed to be inherently antisocial. More recent work has challenged this as a class-based discourse intended to stigmatize high-rise housing for urban working class neighborhoods, instead foregrounding the sociality of vertical living (Pfeiffer 2006; Wacquant 2008). As the strength of community and social solidarity in the wake of tragic failures such as Grenfell has shown, high-rises can also be zones of encounter, engagement, and strong social networks.

Our contributions build on such critiques, showing that while high-rise communities may not conform to state-led ideas of governable, correctly moral communities, categorizations of failure can also lead to new kinds of sociality. From Islamic solidarity in Mombasa (Goodman) to sheltering migrant and diaspora connectivity in Singapore (Guan), the high-rise offers new ways of imagining and making connections with others, whether in the same city or with urban elsewhere. Too often, we suggest, critics of modernist design, of high-rise social housing, or of elite vertical living resort to an environmental determinism that obscures fundamental questions about the changing political economy of housing and the specificities of lived experience. The articles in this theme section seek to problematize these claims and bring alternative perspectives: new readings of the aesthetic norms that high-rise living engenders and inhibits (Tamburo); intimacy and connectivity where isolation is anticipated (Guan); a desire for both proximity *and* distance, security *and* connection to wider communities (Good-

man); both structural precarity and imagined affinities with “world-class” urban futures in the context of poor-quality tenement blocks in Nairobi (Smith).

### **Toward an anthropology of tower block failure**

What, then, does it mean to speak anthropologically of tower block failure? At a time when anthropology approaches the city as fluid, processual, and relational (Weszkalnys 2010), and architectures and infrastructures as contingent social processes (Harvey and Knox 2015; Yaneva 2012), we are intrigued that a blunt failure narrative continues to circulate around the tower block, obscuring the multiplicity and nuance of contexts and lived experience, and slippages between public and elite housing, architectural and social form. Jane Jacobs (2006) and Stephen Graham (2016) warn against uncritical “grand narratives” of failure that seem to deliberately blur the boundaries between technical, social, political, and aesthetic critiques of the tower block. The Grenfell disaster is fundamentally associated with power injustices, negligence, and dereliction of duty by local and national government, as well as outsourced management operations, all of which could be termed to have failed in their responsibilities. But to blame the Grenfell disaster either on some fundamental failure associated with the form of the tower block or on its “antisocial, high-maintenance, disempowering, unnecessary, mostly ugly” characteristics, as the *Guardian* journalist Simon Jenkins (2017) put it, is simply to entrench such grand narratives of failure, at the expense of those whose lived experience tells a different story. This is also where we come up against the limitations of approaches that seek to “think failure otherwise,” that is, to see it as productive and generative. Yes, it is to be hoped that the tragedy of Grenfell will be constructive, in the sense that it will generate new opportunities for tower block residents, better regulations, and more inclusive urban neighborhoods. But we cannot do

justice to the lived experience of events such as Grenfell by rebranding failure as a synonym for deviance, nonconformity, and innovation.

Building on Kosmatopoulos (2011), we seek to build a fine-grained analysis of tower block failure that traces failure across ethnographic and analytic terrains, unraveling how failure itself can be constitutive of wider processes of urban change. Presenting ethnographic accounts from five cities, this theme section examines cases in which tower blocks are implicated in generating new urban futures, even as they become entangled with questions about failure. While each case engages with a different high-rise form, and in radically different social and temporal contexts, the articles speak to a wider set of themes: of the tower block's ambiguous status as a form that is both aspirational and problematic; of contradictions between outreach and exclusion, surface promise and hidden connections; and of the far-reaching social and material effects that "failure," whether material or discursive, has for communities and urban landscapes. At this scale, failure becomes unavoidably enmeshed with issues of power, influence, and governance in relation to processes of urban transformation, and in prompting questions about what failure enables in these contexts, the articles seek to complicate the tower block as conventionally understood in urban theory. Taking Nairobi's recent experience of tower block collapses as a starting point, Constance Smith explores how these structural failures expose the workings of an otherwise opaque housing sector. Exploring the term "fake" that is used by Nairobians to describe collapsed buildings, Smith approaches the city's high-rise skyline through the lens of "gray development": a semi-licit assemblage of urban politics, land markets, planning regulations, counterfeit documentation, and poor-quality construction. Even amid collapses, Nairobi's gray development continues to flourish, which Smith situates in a wider anxiety about fakery and doubling; Nairobians' awareness that urban life is saturated with surface promises that mask a troubling and unpredictable underside.

Goodman's examination of Mombasa's Jaffery Complex, an elite high-rise compound being constructed by and for Khoja Ithna-Asheris (Shia Muslims of Gujarati origin) unpacks the everyday consequences of East Africa's War on Terror through the architectural form of the gated high-rise. Goodman troubles the notion of the elite high-rise as "vertical cocoon" (Graham 2016: 211)—a form that insulates dwellers from the surrounding city yet fragments urban experience and social life. Describing how the Jaffery Complex strives both for security for its residents, and for openness and outreach that reflect a desire to rebuild Muslim solidarities in a context of growing sectarian tensions, Goodman presents a nuanced account of the tensions between proximity and distance by examining how verticality and "pan-Islamic" architecture that is Muslim but not sectarian, index the intersection of insecurity, aspiration, and Islamic reform.

Elisa Tamburo's article explores the question of safety from a different perspective by examining how social relationships and community feeling among residents from informal, military dependents' villages (*juancun*) are affected when they are relocated to high-rise blocks in Taiwan. Homing in on the social effects of new security technologies associated with high-rise dwelling such as intercoms, elevators, and electronic keys, Tamburo examines how they catalyze new regulative regimes and aesthetic norms that interrupt established social practices and routines to cause "social disarticulation" that constitutes a form of failure.

Xinyu Guan and Saffron Woodcraft seek new readings of the supposed failure of Modernist high-rise architectures by examining how failure, success, and urban identities are discursively constructed and reimagined in relation to, respectively, megastructures in Singapore and postwar residential tower blocks in London. Guan analyses how the People's Park Complex in Singapore has become a thriving space for Asian migrant communities yet is seen by many Singaporeans as a failed urban form in the context of contemporary nationalist imaginaries of the city-state. Examining how megastruc-

tures are contemporary sites of connectivity for transnational flows of people, diasporic connections, and aspirations, Guan aims to unsettle linear notions of success or failure linked to the realization of the architects' vision for a new urbanism. Instead, examining the multiple temporalities, spaces of anticipation, and configurations of progress and identity that surround these megastructures, Guan argues for an analysis of failure not in isolation but in counterpoint to the discursive and material space of the city.

Woodcraft examines how imaginaries of failure that surround postwar high-rise housing estates in Britain intersect with the decision-making processes of planners, architects, and housing practitioners designing new neighborhoods in London's Olympic Park. Exploring how the nonobvious meanings invested in failure reveal a slippage between claims to failed architectures and political anxieties about failed subjects, Woodcraft argues the dominant representation of postwar high-rise housing estates in Britain as failed places has been reconfigured in the context of an ideological reinvention of "community" in British politics. The failed tower block as an "aesthetic figure" is enmeshed with a policy apparatus that seeks to create sustainable communities and active citizens as modes of governance over people and places. In different ways, these articles illustrate that failure is not an end point but is itself part of the continual unmaking and remaking of cities, communities, citizens, and space. Taken together, they show how a high-rise lens offers new perspectives on our understanding of the relationship between failure and urban transformation.

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## Note

1. Limited space precludes a deeper assessment of this history, but anthropology's long preoccupation with (social, political, cultural) order, its maintenance, and reproduction is reliant on questions of how such order is held together and what happens when it breaks down (Gluckman 1954). Moments when things do not occur as envisaged or conflict breaks out are ripe for anthropological enquiry, particularly during periods of rapid change, which have been understood to induce social breakdown and ano-



mie (Goody 1957; Parsons 1969). Perhaps most famously, Clifford Geertz (1957) took a “failed” funeral ritual as a point of departure for his critique of functionalism and the need for new ways to account for social change. Ritual failures have continued to provide anthropologists with opportunities for thinking about how mistakes, procedural breakdown and ineffective rites may reveal wider social concerns (Hüsken 2007).

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