



Scaling the Hancock - squeegee in hand

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Roof: Sounds of the street - car horns, sirens and engines - all whisper at this height; even noise seems scared to climb 1,127 vertical feet.

The roof itself hums with noise and activity in the morning, as crew boss Salvador Mariscal gives final instructions to window washers Felipe Berumen and Refugio Ramirez, preparing to clean the exterior windows of the 100-story John Hancock Center.

"Listo?" Mariscal shouts in Spanish to Berumen and Ramirez as the scaffold carrying the two window washers starts to descend the side of the building.

"Listo," they reply.

Ready.

97th floor: A peek through the windows here reveals rooms filled with transmission equipment connected to the rooftop towers - those two white spires that hold about 50 radio and television antennas.

Berumen and Ramirez ignore the technology beyond the glass and focus instead on the dirt: Ramirez scrubs with a soapy brush, and Berumen follows with three crisp squeegee passes.

Each window on the Hancock takes about 30 seconds.

There are 11,459 windows.

"We work fast," Ramirez reports in a rare bit of conversation.

"More windows. More money."

95th floor: From wires and transmitters to white tablecloths and breadbaskets: The scaffold arrives outside the dining room of The Signature Room at the 95th.

Berumen and Ramirez wash their first window here just inches from where a man sits reading a book, oblivious to the laborers and labor on the other side of the glass.

A toddler at the table spots the washers first, waving to the crew. They take no notice. By the time the lunch crowd grabs cameras to capture the sight, the scaffold or "permanent stage," as it's professionally known, is moving on.

94th floor: The Hancock Observatory has replaced a section of windows here with wire mesh, enabling visitors to hear the city 1,000 feet below.

It also allows patrons to yell out to those on the scaffold when it passes by - an impossible feat elsewhere because of the soundproof, sealed windows.

"Are you scared?" a man asks Charles "Red" Kirk, who's on the scaffold this day, operating the controls, as he has done for decades.

"No," Kirk replies with the smile of someone who long ago learned to ignore the void underfoot. Kirk has worked here since 1967 - three years before the building officially opened - meaning he has probably spent more time pacing the scaffold than walking the sidewalks below.

Kirk's company, Skyline Maintenance, takes care of the 64-foot-wide, 32-inch-deep rig and its custom-made track, which allows the scaffold to travel up and down the side of the building. A cranelike device at the top suspends the scaffold from four wires, one attached to each corner.

Kirk brims with tales from the days when harnesses were for horses and safety meant ignoring your hangover. Many of his stories begin: "I wouldn't do this now of course, but ..."

90th-80th floor: A woman eats alone at a dining room table set for six.

A child-size teddy bear reclines upon a bed.

A man in his boxers channel-surfs.

These scenes, and more, appear as the scaffold slides past condominiums, which make up floors 45 through 92. Kirk's son and business partner, Marty, later tells a story about the "dancing naked lady" who appeared one week, shaking and shimmying in the window of a nearby building to the delight of dangling work crews.

"It basically caused a work stoppage," he said.

75th floor: At this height, the scaffold sits level with the roof of the adjacent Water Tower Place, where a pair of peregrine falcons guard a ledge-clutching nest.

All of a sudden, the falcons begin diving between the buildings, buzzing everyone's heads and fraying a few nerves. The aerial assault reminds the elder Kirk of the time that one of the birds dive-bombed a crew and got stuck on the rig, unable to spread its wings because of the scaffold railings.

"Everybody was screaming," Kirk says, chuckling as he remembers the men cowering on one end of the scaffold, while the bird fought to free itself in a rustle of feathers and squawks. (It eventually did.)

This anecdote is much funnier when you're on the ground.

56th floor: The falcons aren't the only wildlife at this height: Spiders cover much of the building's windows and black aluminum skin, even toward the roof. It's a little-known fact that the creatures clutch to the exteriors of most Chicago high-rises. The theory goes that the spiders eat insects blown in on air currents.

During the summer, the window washers must clear thousands of the webs with the brush and their hands, yet this particular pair say they prefer this seasonal chore to being up here when it's cold outside.

Nothing, Kirk agrees, feels worse than a winter wind off Lake Michigan.

50th floor: Halfway down the building, the faces of those walking below become clearer, although it's still easier to see the state of Michigan than to read a license plate below on Michigan Avenue. Everything on the scaffold is strapped in, including all aboard, but water does occasionally slosh out of the buckets and drip off the squeegeed windows. The raindrop-size beads cascade toward the ground at a terminal velocity of 20 feet per second, growing smaller along the way, sometimes evaporating before ever reaching the bottom. Sometimes not. Drip.

43rd floor: This is the floor where a temporary scaffold, used for repairs, broke loose during 60 m.p.h. winds in 2002, raining metal and glass onto Chestnut Street, killing three people and injuring seven more.

Last year, a judge awarded the injured, as well as the families of the deceased, a \$75 million judgment against the then-owner of the building and other liable companies - none of which is now involved in the Hancock.

Although Kirk bears no responsibility for the scaffold that fell - he says he wasn't even at the building when it happened - the fact that the accident occurred on a structure he has spent 40 years caring for obviously still pains him.

"It's just such a tragedy," he said.

It's a tragedy that changed regulations too: Scaffolding is now required to be secured during inclement weather and when work is not occurring.

35th floor: The city might have rumbled a distant drum from greater heights, but here the noise sounds as ordinary as standing in a crosswalk.

It takes nearly two weeks to clean the entire building, which gets scrubbed a few times a year; and this day, the journey upon the Hancock ends here.

Kirk flips the switch and takes the scaffold on a five-minute journey toward the roof, where the stage returns to its hangar.

Roof: The sun is starting to set as the men step out of their harnesses, wipe the dust from their faces and walk down two flights of stairs to the building's elevators, which only go up to the 98th floor.

Marty began the day whistling the tune "Whistle While You Work," as the crew made the morning trek up to the roof, where Marty remained. On the evening ride down to the lobby, he and the others stare silently at the elevator's brushed steel doors.

This day is done. Muscles ache and shoulders slouch. Tomorrow the men will return to do it all again.

More spiders await.

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