



[Back to Skyscraper window cleaners a breed apart](#)

Skyscraper window cleaners a breed apart

May 17, 2009

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When you step onto the roof of Scotia Plaza, the first thing that hits you are the bugs.

You're 70 storeys up. It's an entirely different ecosystem. For one thing, it's 7C cooler than it is at ground level. And this time of year, the place is swarming with aphids. Stand still for long, and you are gradually mummified in a thin layer of critters.

Still, it could be worse.

"Two weeks from now, it'll be the spiders. Lots of them. Big suckers," says Neal Dance, rounding his forefinger and thumb to indicate something about the size of a toonie.

Dance is talking while two of his employees stand nearby fiddling with their safety harnesses. They are getting ready to step off the edge onto a narrow platform suspended 285 metres above the ground and clean the windows.

The number of tall residential buildings in the GTA has increased almost 70 per cent in the past eight years, with roughly 1,300 apartment buildings four storeys or higher. Add in the office towers and unclassifiable structures like the AGO and that's a lot of windows that need professional cleaning.



Trevor Pitts, who has wielded a squeegee for three years, wipes a window high up the 70-storey Scotia Plaza building, which can take 10 weeks to clean.

TARA WALTON/TORONTO STAR

The men and women who do the job aren't suicidal. They just look like that, tied to ropes all the way up above.

Dance, 48, a former washer himself, emblemizes this breed apart. He's a wandering soul whose greying dreadlocks hang down well below his waist. After a decade as a British paratrooper, he travelled the world. At 30, he ended up in Toronto. A random billboard ad got him thinking about window washing.

Dance started out on this very building, washing its windows at night. Eighteen years on, he is the president of Solar Group Inc., and Scotia Plaza gets cleaned by day.

Window-cleaning season stretches from May to November. Right now, Solar is ramping up. The company employs 60 washers to do 400 buildings in the city, including First Canadian Place and the CN Tower.

It isn't hard to find people. People generally find them – bike couriers, construction workers, even a group of parachutists at one point.

"There's a certain sort of thrill-seeker this job attracts," says Dance.

It takes two earthbound weeks to learn how to clean windows properly. There are three days of safety training. Then you're out on a platform or dangling from a bosun's chair – highrise cleaners tend to specialize in one or the other.

Some find that once they have to step out over the abyss, they can't do it. That happens to about one time in 10. Those few are reassigned to ground work.

The cleaners on the Scotia Plaza work on a platform 15 metres long that's hinged in the middle at a right angle to fit the crenulated design of the building. The platform is suspended from a large motor that resembles a locomotive. The motor chugs around the roof via a rail system, putting the platform in place to be lowered.

The tower was built with window cleaning in mind, like all the downtown behemoths. There are vertical channels in the walls in which the cleaners can `plug' the platform, thereby defying the updraft.

Platform cleaners toil in pairs, working until the wind forces them off the building or they feel like quitting. They're paid for piecework – so many dollars for so much of the building cleaned. Generally, they aim to cover about 80 vertical feet of frontage in a day. For that, they'll earn about \$200 each, according to Dance.

Cleaning this tower is a year-round operation. It takes six to 10 weeks to do the whole thing. On the first pass, washers clean the windows.

On the second, they clean the reddish granite cladding.

Today, the team doing the windows is Phillip Watkinson, 29, and Trevor Pitts, 34. They've been at this job for three years.

Though it may strike you as a risky way to earn your bread, this job is all about eliminating risk.

"If you get caught doing any daredevilry, that's the last daredevilry you'll do," says Pitts.

"Yup, you're fired before you hit the ground," adds Watkinson.

The greatest danger is the wind. There are four distinct layers of wind – "like currents in the ocean" – as you move down the tower. And the winds can shift. Before they lower the platform, cleaners let a few drops of water fall. The turbulence of the water's descent tells them what they're dealing with.

Both Watkinson and Pitts cite tranquillity as their favourite part of the job. The only noise is the wind picking up now and again and the odd siren below.

"Oh, and then there are the peregrines," says Pitts, referring to a group of falcons.

"I came up the other morning, and one was just sitting over there," says Watkinson. "He was eating a duck."

The peregrines look pretty, but they're ornery. And unlike spiders, they're dangerous.

They don't weigh much – about a kilo – but anything that can swoop in at speeds up to 320 km/h is going to do some damage. A few years ago, one took a chunk out of a window washer's scalp as he worked.

"He thought his partner had slapped him in the back of the head," says Solar's operations manager, Don Hillier. "He needed stitches."

So. How do you avoid an irritated peregrine?

"The key is to stay close to the building," says Hillier.

"The key is to dump the water out of your bucket and put it on your head," offers Pitts.

A few minutes later, Watkinson and Pitts are poised on the side of the building, silently going about their business. Each has a foot-long brush with soft bristles lashed to one hand and a squeegee to the other.

From the ground, window cleaning looks like a slow process. Up close, it looks impossibly fast, a swirling attack honed by thousands of repetitions.

While they work, Dance continues to wax about the job up high. Mid-sentence, a breeze kicks up, blowing north into town.

"It's three o'clock, isn't it," Dance asks. It is, almost to the second.

"That's the city breathing. In the morning, it breathes out (toward the lake) and in the afternoon it breathes back in," Dance says.

Just another thing you can't learn at ground level.