

Grenfell Tower: in Memoriam

For the vast majority of people living in the UK in 2017-18, the tragic events at Grenfell Tower do not need reiterated. 72 residents lost their lives in a fire that engulfed the 24 storey tower block over the course of just a few hours, a few hours that felt like a lifetime for those involved and those nearby. The responsible few, in short the local council and ergo by extension, the government, have rightly been the focus of criticism; blame can only lie at their door for these 72 deaths, not so much as 'architects of the system' but as apathetic civil servants who inherited and maintained the bad practices that allowed such a blatantly avoidable tragedy to take place on their watch. Again, we don't look to delve into this branch of cause and blame today, but the accompanying essay, by Kevin Rhowbotham, explores this theme further, unafraid and unashamed to point to the root cause of this problem.

So what of Grenfell and its victims? A parallel is drawn to mind. It was the 50th anniversary of Ronan Point just 3 months before Grenfell's first anniversary. Ronan Point; this means little if anything to those outside of the Construction industry, and nothing to those under a certain age group. That the 50th anniversary of the tower's partial collapse – an event that led to a comprehensive restructuring of building codes and practices in the UK – was not even mentioned in the media, goes to show how Ronan Point is not only gone but on the whole forgotten. This is reinforced further by the lack of physical memorial at the site; the building has long since been demolished, and there are no signs, not even a small plaque, to remark on its once presence, nor its passing. Would a piece of publicly-funded civic art be an appropriate gesture? Perhaps. But then again, are people looking to make a pilgrimage to the site, especially 50 years on when most of those involved are likely no longer alive? In short – no; there is nothing to see, no one would go looking for it, and no one is reminded. The memory of the tragedy has faded with time. And unlike the major tragedies of the World Wars, these smaller tragedies are not commemorated annually with televised pageantry, RAF flyovers and the Queen; the shame of a disaster brought about by negligence and incompetence is not one that 'The Powers That Be' wish to remind their subjects of every year.

Tragedy sought through the bravery to face the common enemy is commended; tragedy caused through negligence, such as a building built for purpose, is covered up, quietened down, and results

ultimately in the eradication of any physical manifestation of that tragedy. In the case of Grenfell and it's victims, this will likely be the demolition of the tower and replacement with new housing. There will be a civic-art-piece-style- memorial placed somewhere within the newly reconfigured public space (note- the space is currently very much public) and this will make everyone feel good, because it's new, it's shiny and it has cost lots of money; political short hand for 'caring'. But our project looks to offer a different perspective on this.

The most overwhelming image that sticks in our mind is that of the burnt-out husk of the building after the re. And we clearly aren't the only ones who think this, as this has become the go-to image for the media time and time again; it is haunting, it is galling, and it shocks; as it should do. This feeling however cannot be allowed to fade over time. Not the pain per se, but the stark reminder of what happened; the power of the physical reminds us, and the hallowed ground created by the disaster shouldn't be allowed to be whitewashed or merrily paving over with new homes under the guise of "*well there is a housing crisis, you know*". The housing created on the site of Grenfell is a drop in the ocean to what is required in London and the UK in 2018, and some things - a memorial to those killed is more important in the long term, to create a civic memory and remind those that what happened cannot happen again. Otherwise, it may well happen again - read about Ronan Point, then read about Grenfell, although one was structural and the other re-induced, the similarities are frightening. Systemically, the building industry and it's procurement gambit has not advanced in 50 years, and with the race now on to produce housing to meet almost exponential demands, what is it stop poor practices continuing and another tragedy from happening again?

This is why proper and meaningful civic memorials are so important - we cannot afford to forget - the city needs its scars, and it learns from them, just as a child does.

London's Callin', Everybody knows

An accompanying text by Kevin Rhowbotham

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Architecture and Taste (FAT), Alphaville, Big Open Box and most recently ArchitectureBlockChain. Winner of numerous awards, he held the positions of Professor of Urban design at the T.U. Berlin, and Distinguished Professor of Urban Design at U.I.C Chicago. He has published numerous articles and two influential books, 'Form to Programme' and 'Field Event / Field Space'.

Grenfell DefinitionsCover-up

An institutional psychosis runs to the very heart of the bureaucratic state. Its name is 'cover-up', whitewash, fake news, dissimulation. Cover-up is an instrumental means by which the state machine can vitiate popular anger, through the existing mechanisms of a legal state administration, by means of the public inquiry and by means of a very public wringing of political hands. Cover-up is the first reaction of administrative kleptocracies of all stripes; its purpose is to re-establish business as usual at the earliest opportunity.

Value Engineering

Although architects have attacked the culture of cost-cutting and value-stripping, the obliquely termed strategy of 'value engineering', is now enshrined in the pervasive Joint Contract Tribunal Design and Build Contract: Current edition: DB 2016 and is universally undertaken as part of every sizable commercial building project.

Value engineering proposes the elimination or modification of project elements, which are not deemed essential to required functions. (Function here means, the elementary functioning of the project at lowest acceptable level. Precisely what you can get away with legally under the requirements of certification.)

Value engineering proposes the addition of elements to the project in order to achieve the required level of functionality which might otherwise, fail to be attained. (Value engineering is always a process of cost reduction. The idea that additional costs might be introduced is always a matter of risk avoidance and undertaken at a point of crisis.)

Value engineering proposes changing elements to improve quality or performance to meet more desired levels established by the owner/user. (Desired levels here means maintenance of financial margins, dispensation of risk and increased productivity, speed of construction within the terms of certification)

Old School

A culture has emerged within the architectural profession which prioritises litigious and financial risk over quality of product, robust construction and long term safety issues. Arms are twisted, designers ridiculed for raising concerns, and the contracting industry in general has incentivised a cost cutting approach in order to maximise profit and avoid risk, as a matter of course.

A general attitude within the architectural profession has emerged and is now pervasive, that it is altogether naïve, not to say insouciant to design, to opt for purpose solutions, at every level of architectural engagement. A degree of cost shaming ensues. The dismissive term 'old school' is commonly aimed at those designers and architects who argue for a comprehensive design approach which balances client need and contractor provision. A position which is generally interpreted as not 'business friendly'.

Cross Dressing

Under the auspices of Design & Build procurement, roles of key players have become recast and distorted in a merry-go-round of indolent cross dressing. The client is now the employer and the contractor the client of the architect, once role swapping (novation) proceeds. The authority of the lead consultant, formerly the Architect, has been distorted into a managerial role whereby the incumbent is charged with driving down cost and quality to meet unrealistic budgets and/or shareholders' expectations of profit.

Killing the messenger and discarding the message

Ronan Point was a 21-storey tower block in Canning Town, East London, which partly collapsed on 16 May 1968, only two months after it had opened. The true basis of the collapse was obscured as towers per se were conveniently judged the prima facie 'cause' of what for all the world seemed to be a general institutional abandonment of thorough, rational and fit for purpose procedures. A similar fate awaits Grenfell as combustible cladding may take the blame for this catastrophe thereby avoiding any root and branch inquiry into the questionable procedures of the building industry as a whole.

Staying just on the right side of legal

Regulation of the building industry constructs the general rule against which the market can compete and against which it can indemnify itself at a cost which does not affect the market. In truth the content of the general rule matters little to the industry. What is vital however, is that such a rule provides a means to indemnify players through certification at an equivalent cost for all. Building codes established a 'highest permissible risk' bench mark for production, not as minimal criteria to be exceeded, but as the lowest operating requirements for certification and indemnification. All production is held to this bench mark, by primary stake holders, most especially the client, and certification at lowest cost becomes the prime goal of all consultants involved in the design process. Such practices have fostered a culture of risk aversion in which the only terms of operation are risk induced; a culture focused solely on the production of the highest profit at the lowest risk.

Fit for purpose production is undermined by the very conditions of modern procurement, and current regulatory rule fails to establish an industry offering best practice as a matter of course, in favour of an industry exploiting a failing system in order to compete and survive.

Returning to the same

Despite the collective outrage following the Grenfell cataclysm it is likely that history will return us to the same, and what will be finally fashioned from the inquiry, will, as everybody knows, have little clarity and expose no substantial truths. Calls for tighter regulation, most especially are calls which are fashioned to construct an appearance of self-flagellation in the absence of self-examination and the flaccid extension of managerial oversight. Doubtless a new phalanx of posturing consultants will be created, faking their way through cut and paste exercises and desk top reviews to produce empty assurances constructed to satisfy the revised conditions of certification for a substantial fee.

Primary consultant

The organisation of consultant input is no longer the concern of the architect. The production of design solutions are not produced in camera, as it were, under the auspices of a lead consultant, but are the result of passing the proposal around the various consulting bodies comprising the 'design team'. This is a strategy of amelioration and not of centralised determination.

Certification

Certification is the mitigation of risk by means of a legal instrument; the certificate. To take certification as a guarantee of the state of that which is certified is to confuse the world as it is with a world constructed from the instrumental reductions and blind tribal structures of the industry, no less the profession of architecture.

Certification constructs a virtual economy of signifiers in which appropriate delivery is asserted indirectly by record and not directly by deed. Certification dislodges responsibility from the person to the corporation. The production of it for purpose work is no longer a matter of pride in work and reputation for work well done, but rather the exhibition of appropriate certification.

Certification is a general solution for the poverty of skills within an artisanal industry which calls for duty of care at all points of contact with the product.

Economy of avoidance

Litigation enacted to ensure that liability for an inappropriately discharged duty of care can be properly prosecuted, has produced an economy of avoidance at every level of the building process. If avoidance of prosecution relies solely on certification, without personal liability, then we have constructed, rationally, the perfect conditions for Grenfell to occur and substantial root and branch changes to the industry notwithstanding, will reoccur. What must follow is the construction of a culture of avoidance in which the terms for navigating the construction process rely principally, not on the provision of commodious, healthy and safe buildings, but on the vitiation of all liability, owed by prospective stake holders and interested parties in the pursuit of maximum profit.

From Regulation to Algorithm

A perceived need in contemporary society to extend the regulation to all parts of industry in which risk may arise, will make regulation a ubiquitous command structure in which all actions follow the rule. Rule is at all points the ossification of innovation.

Fear of litigation has fostered a general collapse into regulatory certification. The use of virtual management systems will inevitably follow.

Our Glorious State

The systemic failure of regulation and its oversight is the de facto cause of the Grenfell debacle. Everybody knows this, since a systemic failure of government and corporate oversight has subtended the intrinsic crises of the times we live in.

Everybody knows that is, except the incumbent administrative elites, who, myopic to the last, have offered no solution of their own devising, but, in lieu of any explicit mea culpa, which must out eventually, has mendaciously called for further external regulation and a blanket banning of flammable façade materials, thereby attempting to deflect the viscous glare of accusation, for which it is surely culpable, by echoing the bellowing crowd.

Epilogue

“Give me your hungry, your tired, your poor, I’ll piss on ‘em. That’s what the statue of bigotry says.

Your poor huddled masses,

Let’s club ‘em to death,

And dump ‘em on the boulevard.”

Lou Reed, January 1989

Grenfell Tower: in Memoriam - A Proposal by JAA

The still, silent, blackened shell of Grenfell was a haunting and brutally honest account of what happened, and as such very disturbing to view in the aftermath. Now over a year on, the tower is cocooned in scaffolding and tarpaulin; not as raw, not as black, covered up.

Grenfell Tower: in Memoriam retains the existing tower’s structure and encases it within a civic-scaled sarcophagus of 224 black concrete panels. Visually, the tower will remain part of the skyline, but differentiated from the similarly scaled blocks nearby by its lack of windows and unpunctured silhouette. It stands in the city scape, part of it, but standing apart.

At night, Flat 16 where the re started, is illuminated amongst the mass of shadow, a small gilded beacon, a quiet nightly narrator of the tragic event. The rooftop is made accessible to form a memorial roof garden. A perimeter of columns topped by a canopy in pared-back black concrete as per the monolithic tower below, act as a muted backdrop to contrast to the newly planted colours and swaying wild flowers on this new 25th storey open to the sky. Stillness is formed, a true quiet space above the hustle and bustle. A place to stop. A place to reflect. A place to breathe.

The physical proposals are somber, restrained, quiet, yet effective through their presence in the medium and distant views, how the memorial speaks to the city and to the local area. At close range however, the bottom four floors are renovated and re-purposed, made a pleasant and approachable space. These levels are extended and clad in glazing, lightweight and open, in contrast to the imposing and expressive bulk of the tower above - the scheme is not only physically present as a memorial, but also of purpose and use to the community. A new community centre is introduced, the boxing club is reinstated as well as a small permanent documentary gallery to the disaster and its victims.

All other floors are closed off , serving no purpose other than to form the monument in the landscape.

This project does not claim to be the answer to the di cult conditions found in the aftermath of Grenfell, but instead offers an alternative way of thinking about the site (and others similar) and its new-found sanctity through disaster. If we build over these individual spaces borne out of tragedy we will forget over time. And the city needs its scars; the city needs to remember. Because if we don't, in the future we won't only be discussing Ronan Point and Grenfell, but who knows how many other avoidable catastrophes.