

After Grenfell Tower fire: High-rise evacuated in Wuppertal, Germany

Dietmar Henning
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Following the Grenfell Tower inferno in London on June 14, politicians and officials responsible for construction in Germany boasted that such a catastrophe could not happen here due to the strict safety guidelines and building regulations.

That was a lie. Less than two weeks after the London disaster, on June 27, 72 inhabitants of an apartment building in Wuppertal in North Rhine-Westphalia (NRW) were forced to leave their homes in a hurry. The building was evacuated because it had a similar facade to Grenfell Tower.

Residents of the 11-story building at Hilgershöhe in Wuppertal will only be able to return to their apartments once the facade is removed, which could take months.

As Wuppertal's building department chief Frank Meyer explained, the facade consists of plastic panels that are attached to a wooden construction. Empty spaces are filled with a wood shavings-like insulation material. Both the facade elements as well as the wood and the insulation material are easily combustible.

There are no fire breaks between the floors to prevent the spread of a fire. This means the building, like Grenfell Tower, could be the site of an uncontrollable blaze in no time at all.

In addition, there is no automatic fire alarm system in the Wuppertal building. The only escape route—a staircase—is accessible via small balconies. If the facade were to be set ablaze, the balconies would no longer be accessible and the escape route cut off.

The serious dangers associated with this condition have been known to the city authorities for seven years, since an inspection by the fire brigade in 2010. But it is only now that action is being taken. Jochen Braun, head of Wuppertal's construction and housing department, told the *Rheinische Post*: "We had been aware of the problems for some time, but following the high-rise fire in London we have re-evaluated the danger." All in all, Wuppertal alone was having to check 70 high-rise buildings, he said.

The evacuation of the high-rise apartment building was decided on in the morning and had already been carried out by the afternoon. The city acted extremely drastically; police blocked all access to the building. From early afternoon onward, local authority staff knocked on residents' doors and told them they had just 20 minutes to pack a suitcase with the

essentials and leave the building. Residents who came home later were only allowed to enter the building accompanied by a security guard to get things from their apartments.

The *Rheinische Post* reported scenes of angry and desperate residents, including families with small children and several pensioners. "At about 7 pm, the last and oldest inhabitant left the building," the newspaper wrote, which is published in nearby Düsseldorf. "Johanna Klosa is 89 years old and has lived in the high-rise for 47 years." She left the building supported by a policeman and her granddaughter, who said, "My grandma is very confused and has cried bitterly." She does not understand why the residents were not given any more time. Her grandmother was very concerned that "she will not return."

So that no one can return unauthorized, the authorities have even changed the locks and engaged a security service. "We cannot allow someone to gain access using a spare key," a spokeswoman for the city of Wuppertal said. "The danger is simply too great."

The pattern is well-known: Whenever a catastrophe occurs, all sorts of initiatives are undertaken to provide an alibi. However, once public consternation has settled down, nothing changes as a rule.

This example shows that the same conditions that led to catastrophe in London exist in many places. The high-rise building in Wuppertal now belongs to a real estate company called Intown Property Management based in Berlin. This company buys residential and commercial properties throughout Germany to sell or rent for a profit. On Intown's web site can be read, "Our ultimate goal is the appreciation of real estate values."

According to the *Leipziger Volkszeitung*, Intown "belongs to the extremely opaque multi-company owner Amir Dayan." He is active in Eastern Europe, Sweden, the Benelux countries and, above all, Germany, and often uses Cyprus as the seat of his companies. "Dayan is seen as very publicity-shy, rarely does anything from his companies penetrate to the outside."

A spokeswoman for the Wuppertal authorities said that Intown, as well as the previous owners, had been asked several times to renew the facade. "We have written to the changing owners, set deadlines and imposed fines, but none of the

owners have reacted to this.”

When the Wuppertal authorities decided that the building had to be cleared, Intown initially refused to participate in the measure in any way. Only two days later did the company say the facade would be renovated without mentioning any details or providing clear deadlines. For the residents, this means they are still in the dark about whether they can ever move in again, and if so, how long they will have to wait.

In the meantime, the political establishment is doing everything to assuage the public. Federal Building Minister Barbara Hendricks (Social Democratic Party, SPD) has promised that the state governments would now quickly look for other dangerous buildings throughout the country. The Conference of State Building Ministers will “in the short term, collate where such buildings exist.”

The deputy chairman of the SPD faction in North Rhine-Westphalia’s state assembly, Sarah Philipp, stressed that “the safety of residents of high-rise buildings should be the first priority.” She called on the minister responsible from the incoming NRW Christian Democrat Union-Free Democrat (CDU-FDP) state administration to examine all residential buildings higher than 22 metres for the flammability of the facades. She failed to mention the fact that the outgoing SPD-Green Party state executive had not bothered to do this.

However, the new state government will not change anything fundamental in this respect either. A spokesman for North Rhine-Westphalia’s CDU parliamentary group said, “We assume that all municipalities are complying with their responsibilities.”

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According to building regulations, which fall within the jurisdiction of the federal states in Germany, buildings are regarded as high-rise if the upper floor is at least 22 meters (72 feet) above the ground. This is the reach of fire brigade turntable ladders. Above this height, special fire protection requirements apply, and the facade insulation is subject to stricter criteria.

However, the example of Wuppertal shows that as far as big business is concerned, the pressure to increase profits is stronger than any safety requirements. This is especially true in the real estate and construction sector. For example, the company responsible for installing Grenfell Tower’s facade chose an easily combustible material to save 5,000 pounds (US\$ 6,472). In Wuppertal neither the city authorities nor the real estate company has seen any reason to replace the illegal and highly dangerous facade for all these years.

Moreover, experts and the fire brigades also point to the existing grey area in residential buildings that are less high: where the situation remains dangerous in such buildings that have several floors but are just under 22 meters high. There, the easily flammable insulation material is used unchecked.

“This is a big problem for the fire brigade,” said Dietmar

Grabinger of the Fire Brigade Association in NRW. “It poses us enormous challenges because they [such buildings] are quickly set on fire.” Sometimes, a spark, for example, from a garbage bin jumping directly onto the facade is enough to instantly set a building on fire, the expert said.

The authorities usually do not check the facades at all for buildings below 22 metres. “We do not conduct any special checks in the case of medium-height buildings,” a spokeswoman for the NRW city of Duisburg confirmed.

It is precisely for these buildings that Executive Director of the Frankfurt Fire Brigade Reinhard Ries is calling for better fire protection. According to Ries, a facade in Frankfurt in 2012 and Duisburg in 2016 led to similar incidents as in London, albeit with fewer deaths.

In Duisburg last May, a fire on the ground floor was transmitted via the facade to the four higher stories. A 33-year-old mother and her eight and 14-year-old sons died, and 28 people were injured, in some cases seriously. The fire in a room became a catastrophe because the flames quickly raced up to the attic via the easily inflammable facade. “Like an ignition cord in a fireplace” was how Duisburg’s Fire Brigade chief Oliver Tittmann later described it in the regional press.

Fire Chief Ries has therefore demanded, “The ground floor must be clad in such a way that it is not combustible and there is a fire barrier on every floor.” Ries warns particularly against using polystyrene foam as an insulating material.

The easily flammable polystyrene insulation panels act as a fire accelerant, as well as producing toxic fumes when burning. The conflagration at Grenfell Tower was triggered by a small fire in a fourth-floor apartment due to a faulty refrigerator, and spread within minutes to the whole building via the facade. The toxic fumes that were released in the process prevented many residents from escaping. It is now known that the combustible outer facade of the building released deadly hydrogen cyanide. Many residents died through inhaling the toxic smoke.



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