

Cost-cutting and “visual appearance” main concerns for Grenfell Tower refurbishment

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The Grenfell Inquiry heard that the tower’s refurbishment was rushed so that the council could save money by using the same contractor it was planning to employ on a neighbouring project.

Mark Anderson, director of assets and regeneration for the Kensington and Chelsea Tenant Management Organisation (KCTMO), recalled that he needed to “progress the design,” acting “as quickly as possible.” In 2012, he approached Studio E architects, who were already working on the design of the Kensington Academy and Leisure Centre (KALC). Head of housing at the Conservative-run Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea council (RBKC) Laura Johnson said at the time that having the same contractor would “ensure the two projects are able to deliver cost savings where possible.”

There were also aesthetic considerations, some of which included the cladding. RBKC Officer Jane Trethewey was interested in replacing Grenfell’s windows saying, “This will have the advantage of addressing one of its worst property assets and prevent it looking like a poor cousin to the brand new facility next door... There may be an option to have a cladding design that links to the design of the Academy [school next to Grenfell tower] so that the visual appearance of the area is significantly improved.”

Anderson told the inquiry that the idea was to create a “synergy” between the two projects that used the same consulting team and contractor: “Could we gain synergy through carrying out the projects in tandem and potentially, as you were alluding to earlier, could we get synergy through having a similar aesthetic finish to both the academy, leisure centre and Grenfell Tower.”

Earlier in the inquiry, the director of Studio E architects admitted the firm would never have been appointed to the Grenfell project if the bid had gone to tender, since it had no experience of refurbishing high-rises or overcladding residential buildings.

This week of the inquiry was devoted to testimony from

KCTMO employees. On Monday, project manager Paul Dunkerton was questioned on evidence showing he had referred to the tower’s residential safety campaigners as “antagonists.” An email called Edward Daffarn and Francis O’Connor the “main antagonists” on the Lancaster West Estate, after the former asked for an update on the planning applications.

Daffarn and O’Connor had regularly blogged as members of the Grenfell Action Group. In one, “KCTMO—Playing with fire,” they warned that “only a catastrophic event will expose the ineptitude and incompetence of our landlord.” Daffarn prophetically warned that “a serious fire in a tower block... is the most likely reason that those who wield power at the KCTMO will be found out and brought to justice.”

The inquiry saw letters sent to KCTMO from the Grenfell Tower Leaseholders Association (GTLA) complaining about an “established lack of communication,” as well as specific issues. One observed that it had taken the organisation 19 months to inform tenants their fire doors needed upgrading following a fire risk assessment (FRA).

When the GTLA asked for confirmation, Dunkerton told them a review of the FRA found “none of the properties at Grenfell Tower are highlighted as having ‘potentially non-compliant’ entrance doors.” Phase one of the inquiry report has already established that faulty fire doors contributed to the spread of toxic fumes and smoke during the inferno.

David Gibson, KCTMO former heard of capital investment, explained last Wednesday that all his discussions at the time had been about cost and appearance. “The discussions we were having were: what does it look like, is it acceptable for planners and what’s the cost... Discussions weren’t any further than that because we weren’t expecting to be offered anything that might not be compliant.”

He claimed that he did not know what “coated aluminium ACM” was when designers offered it as a cheaper alternative to zinc. “My assumption rightly or wrongly was there are many properties in London with aluminium cladding and this was aluminium cladding. I didn’t think any further than that.”

He nevertheless said he had asked the Rydon contracts manager whether the cladding was safe and was shocked to learn about a gap between insulation and cladding panels, which he thought could cause a chimney effect for flames. Simon Lawrence, a project manager of the building contractor, Rydon, assured him that the cladding was “inert” and “would not burn at all.”

Both Lawrence and Philip Booth, an Artelia Employer’s Agent, claim they cannot recall Gibson’s concerns. Nor can anyone find an electronic record of the particular meeting. Gibson also remembered a series of meetings over four or five months that no one can now find any written records for.

Gibson admitted to attending a secret “offline” meeting with Rydon, discussing how the latter might reduce costs. This came before the end of the tender process and against legal advice warning that the action would breach EU regulations for a “contracting authority to undertake negotiations with the tenderer prior to contract award.”

Claire Williams, KCTMO project role manager, defended her decision not to hire a client design advisor offered by consultants Artelia for around £30,000. She claimed they “would not be best placed to comment on cladding,” “would have muddled the waters of communication,” and “that perhaps wouldn’t bring anything to the table.” Her decision, she insisted, was “not at all” a matter of money.

Other developments occurred outside of the inquiry. Dame Judith Hackitt, who led a review of building regulations in 2018 and is now chairing the board establishing the government’s new building safety regulator, said the inquiry demonstrated that the system is “broken”. “What can I say? ‘Disappointing’ doesn’t even begin to cover my reaction. I can only say that it strengthens my resolve to do everything I can to drive through this much-needed change.”

On Wednesday, the government announced the appointment of a third panel member for the inquiry, Ali Akbor, after the position had been vacant since January. Boris Johnson’s previous choice was Benita Mehra, who quickly stepped down after it was found she had chaired a charity receiving funding from Grenfell cladding manufacturer Arconic.

Akbor, awarded an OBE in the New Year’s Honours list, is chief executive of the Leeds-based Unity Homes and Enterprise, established in 1987 “to meet the housing needs of black and minority ethnic communities throughout Leeds.” It runs a 1,300-home housing association, as well as assisting entrepreneurs by providing 142 business units for some 80 concerns. Unity has an asset base of £2 million, annual turnover of £8 million and an average yearly capital budget of £5 million.

The BME National collective of black and minority ethnic housing associations web site commented on Akbor’s OBE award, “In 2018, as Secretary/Treasurer of BME National, Ali organised a hugely successful House of Lords reception to celebrate the achievements of BME housing associations over more than 30 years. At Ali’s invitation, Housing Secretary James Brokenshire agreed to be principal speaker.”

Brokenshire has played a key role in the denial of justice to Grenfell’s victims. Despite promising to implement all recommendations from the first phase of the Inquiry “without delay” and “in full,” he opposed this when it came to a vote in parliament.

The inquiry will continue this week with London now under Tier 2 pandemic restrictions. Even more limited attendance will be allowed than under already severe restrictions.

Week after week, the inquiry reveals further details about an act of social murder that led to the deaths of 72 people. Now over three years after the fire, it is scheduled to continue for years more but has no powers of prosecution. All who testify before it in political and corporate circles are already granted immunity from prosecution for what they admit to in its proceedings. The demand from those seeking justice must be that the inquiry is ended and that those among the political and corporate elite guilty of social murder be arrested, charged, and put on trial.

For further information visit and join the Grenfell Fire Forum Facebook page.



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