

?Grenfell: The Untold Story on Channel 4—“You’ve put profit before people’s well-being”

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Directed by James Newton, produced by Daisy Ayliffe at BBC Studios for Channel 4. The programme is available to watch (for viewers in the UK) at Channel 4’s website here until October 5, 2021.

On June 14, 2017, 72 people were killed in a fire at Grenfell Tower in London. It was an act of social murder, preventable and predicted.

The tower was refurbished with highly flammable cladding panels to cut costs. Residents’ complaints were ignored. Firefighters were not informed of the building’s cladding, so the existing fire policy was inappropriate.

The longer the official Inquiry into the fire drags on, the more it is revealed as an exercise in preventing those responsible from being held to account. This devastating new documentary, *Grenfell: The Untold Story*, shown as the Inquiry’s second phase opens, is a stark reminder of the injustices that remain unresolved.

The film incorporates previously unbroadcast footage of meetings between residents, the council’s arms-length management company—the Kensington and Chelsea Tenant Management Organisation (KCTMO)—and then local Conservative MP, Victoria Borwick.

This footage, by artist Constantine Gras, constitutes vital evidence of KCTMO’s contempt for residents, and of the residents’ fight, long before the fire, for justice and the social right to decent, safe housing.

The footage shows that KCTMO initially considered demolishing Grenfell Tower, built in 1974, before releasing £10 million for a refurbishment, which began in 2014. KCTMO would oversee this, being responsible for health and safety, and commissioned contractor Rydon—the lowest bidder—for the work.

In 2015, as a PR exercise, KCTMO hired Gras as the refurbishment’s artist-in-residence. He was contracted to make a short promotional film and a large-scale artwork.

Residents were initially hostile, with Gras, looking back, saying that there was a sentiment that “We don’t need artists here!” In part, they saw Gras’s fee as a drain on the refurbishment budget. Social and cultural life are not separable, and these are not either/or decisions.

The crisis Grenfell exposed touches on every aspect of social and cultural life. Artistic responses are a significant part of the attempt to address it.

Gras was conscious of the risk of “artwashing,” considering the possibility that KCTMO were using him to gloss over existing cracks. Instead, to his credit, he decided “to deviate from my contract” and make a documentary about local residents, *The Forgotten Estate*. An extract of the film is available here.

Gras’s actions earned him the trust of residents, who invited him to

film their meetings with the council and TMO. The TMO were less enamoured, telling Gras he would not be paid for that filming. KCTMO also never hung his mural artwork in the tower, so it survived the fire.

Gras documented residents’ complaints about the refurbishment work from the outset. He handed this material to the police one month after the fire and made it available to survivors and the bereaved. The police have now cleared him to use it publicly, which again points to the limited nature of the inquiry, which has no powers of prosecution and, in an agreement with the Conservative government, will not investigate any causes of a “social, economic and political nature”.

The film shows that KCTMO pledged to consult residents during the refurbishment, but, recalls Grenfell tenant Marcio Gomes, the “penny dropped” when the work began. Residents frequently found themselves without water or functioning lifts in the 24-storey tower. KCTMO kept changing plans without consultation, and “didn’t respond well” to their own complaints procedure.

This created a backlash. Ed Daffarn, already active in the Grenfell Action Group (formed in 2010 to oppose a “gross overdevelopment of an inappropriate site” adjacent to Grenfell Tower), called a meeting. This resulted in many residents putting up notices barring Rydon access to their flats. Says Daffarn, recalling events in the film: “If you want to divide a community, you don’t allow them to speak with a unified voice.” The Residents Group was formed in 2015 to provide that voice.

Gras attended their first meeting with local Labour Party councillors—who controlled the local district where Grenfell is located—and the KCTMO. Grenfell resident David Collins said they were not consulted on changes. KCTMO insisted they had been. Tenant Lorraine Beadle put up a “no access” sign on her door, but Rydon entered her flat anyway and fitted new windows.

What is clearly revealed—in filmed evidence—is that two years before the fire the residents were complaining about the refurbishment works. Their complaints touched directly on safety.

Beadle is shown bitterly complaining about a gap around the new window frame big enough to put her arm through. In response, Rydon filled the gap with silicone. Later, in the harrowing testimonies of the night of the fire, we hear of such mastic surrounds melting and burning away.

In July 2015, the Residents Group met Peter Maddison of KCTMO and Borwick, pointing out that 46 percent of residents were unhappy with the work already done.

Gras’s footage is damning. It captures how vulnerable the residents

were, although they could not realise the enormity of the indifference and resentment they faced from the authorities. Says Collins, “We were fighting for our lives.”

Borwick declared that resolving these complaints was not her job, but local councillors’. When Meron Mekonnen, a mother of two small children, complained about regularly having no water, Borwick advised her to “go to a neighbour’s” for a bath.

Borwick now claims she was on the residents’ side. “Everything we were told was a lie,” says Mekonnen.

As unhappiness spread, the Residents Group had another, more acrimonious meeting with KCTMO and Borwick in December 2015.

KCTMO’s contempt is undisguised. Maddison will not respond to general points, saying they will investigate specific complaints. “But you don’t!” explodes Daffarn. Maddison denies even receiving information about specific complaints. Their handling of such complaints can be seen in the response to Daffarn’s concerns about his neighbours’ flat doors. Nothing happened, and two of his neighbours died in the fire as a result.

The Residents Group called for an independent inquiry. There was none.

The refurbishment was completed in July 2016, but residents were unaware of the dangers of the cladding. They were shown photographs but not samples, so saw it as cosmetic rather than the life-threatening finish it really was.

A title screen in the documentary notes that “original plans to use fire-resistant cladding were changed at the beginning of refurbishment to cut costs, saving £293,368.”

Housing journalist Peter Apps discusses well the Aluminium Composite Material (ACM) cladding and insulation materials used. ACM’s polyethylene bond burns and melts, spreading fire, while the burning/melting insulation material in some cases gave off cyanide.

It was a deadly combination, and the commercial suppliers knew the risks. Arconic were warned 10 years before the fire their product was flammable. Celotex rigged their fire-safety test. Kingspan’s fire-safety test concluded their product burned like a “raging inferno.” Their products covered Grenfell Tower from top to bottom.

This invalidated existing fire safety procedures. The London Fire Brigade’s (LFB) “stay put” policy—recommending residents not directly affected by the fire remain in their homes with doors and windows shut—was based on the expectation that fires would be contained within individual flats. But the refurbishment ensured any fire would spread further, making “stay put” untenable.

There were still further “missed warnings.” At nearby Shepherd’s Court, a flat fire on August 19, 2016—just 10 months before Grenfell—also spread to external cladding.

In November 2016, the Grenfell Action Group posted a blog article reading: “It is a truly terrifying thought but the Grenfell Action Group firmly believe that only a catastrophic event will expose the ineptitude and incompetence of our landlord, the KCTMO, and bring an end to the dangerous living conditions and neglect of health and safety legislation that they inflict upon their tenants and leaseholders.”

The LFB, just months before the fire, were concerned enough to ask councils for information on the Grenfell Tower’s cladding. KCTMO’s fire risk assessor responded that Grenfell Tower “has cladding but it meets building regulations.” Firefighters, expecting modern building containment, were stunned to see the rapidly igniting polyethylene spread fire up Grenfell Tower faster than one floor per minute.

The footage and testimony of the fire are all but unbearable. We

hear Marcio Gomes’s desperate 999 call as he tried to get his wife—heavily pregnant and asthmatic—and daughters down from the 21st floor. After eight minutes or so he realised that his daughter was no longer ahead of him, but still above him.

They were all eventually rescued, but his son, Logan, was stillborn while Marcio’s wife was in an induced coma after the fire. Eighteen children, one quarter of the children living in Grenfell Tower, died that night.

Survivor Willie Thompson saw cladding panels pop, and fire spreading around the building as if someone were pouring petrol cans down it. Gras talks of his own “disbelief, shock.” It is more than anyone should have to endure.

The documentary concludes with the official Inquiry. Its chair, Sir Martin Moore-Bick, is shown at the opening session in 2017 saying it was convened because we “need to understand.” But the main issue was that those responsible for heinous crimes had to be held accountable, which is what the inquiry is aimed at avoiding.

Apps, whose *Inside Housing* has been steadfast in exposing the criminality of the cladding, tries to be sanguine about the “decades-long” process that led to the fire, but the veneer is wearing thin. The survivors cannot grieve until they have justice, he says simply.

This will not come through the Inquiry, as closing slides show. KCTMO, Rydon, Peter Maddison, all offer contemptuous statements that it would be “inappropriate” to comment further in the light of the ongoing inquiry. KCTMO even dare to offer “sympathies and condolences” to the survivors and families of those killed.

Rather than being given immunity and protected, these people should be charged and on trial.

The film shows, however, that Grenfell marked a turning point in consciousness. The survivors have been through hell, and they are blunt. “They’re still not listening to us. We want change,” insists Hanan Wahabi. Ed Daffarn says, “Those people would still be here if we’d been respected or listened to.”

Four years on, many high-rise towers are still covered in flammable cladding. Last week, Lorraine Beadle told press “Nothing has changed,” demanding to know why cladding had not been removed everywhere. She warned Prime Minister Boris Johnson that if he does not act “he will have blood on his hands.” He already does. As London Mayor (2008-2016) he slashed fire services in the capital and told firefighters who protested to “get stuffed”.

There are growing recognitions of what caused the Grenfell disaster, and what must be done for the future. Marcio Gomes states, “You’ve put profit ahead of people’s well-being.” Willie Thompson says simply and powerfully of the broader issue of the right to safe housing: “Let people sleep at night.”



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