



Caption to in here

The looming tower

The author of a book exploring the area around Grenfell Tower in the 1990s returns after the fire to consider the estate's social history – and future

By Ed Platt

At around 1am on 14 June, Beina-zir Lasharie had just finished watching a film and was getting ready to go to bed when she heard shouting outside her flat in Testerton Walk, one of the three low-rise blocks that stand at the foot of Grenfell Tower, on the Lancaster West estate, west London. Lasharie had lived there since 1983, when she was three. She remembered playing on the swings outside, seeing the 24-storey block rise above her every time she put her head back. “It was the first thing I saw every day when I left my home – and when I came home, it’s the last thing I saw,” she said.

The estate was often noisy at night, but this didn’t sound like a party. She looked out to see what was going on and saw flames reflecting from people’s faces, lighting up and going dark. In the walkway outside her flat, she met a woman who lived on the 11th floor of Grenfell Tower with her three kids. They had escaped soon after the fire began, reportedly on the fourth floor. “I hugged her, and said ‘I’m glad you’re safe’, and then I stood there with everybody else, looking up, feeling helpless,” Lasharie told me.

Within an hour the fire had spread to the side of the block where Lasharie and her neighbours were standing, and the cladding – the external aluminium composite skin that had been applied to the outside of the tower during its recent refurbishment – started falling off. Soon the police and fire brigade came up to the walkways and told everyone to leave, for their own safety. “I grabbed my children who were sleeping and ran. And by the time we got to the end of the walkway, we could see the tower fully in flames.”

Lasharie drove with her two children to her brother’s house in Chelsea, and they stayed for five days before moving to a hotel in the precincts of Victoria Station. Yet since there was nowhere for her children to play, Lasharie decided to go home after a few days.

Soon, the family was on the move again after another, much smaller fire started in a neighbouring flat. It was contained but they had to walk through the smoke to get out, and they moved again to a hotel in Knightsbridge, where they were still living six weeks after the fire. Lasharie’s son, who is three, doesn’t want to go back to the estate.

He was so traumatised by the fire that he had refused to go near a barbecue in the park. When Lasharie took him back to Lancaster West to visit the GP, he had said he wanted to go back to their “holiday home”, as he called the hotel in Knightsbridge. “He doesn’t want to be where he can see the tower,” she said, and she didn’t blame him: “It doesn’t smell right, it doesn’t feel right, there’s stuff falling onto my balcony.”

Lasharie nevertheless wanted to reintroduce her son and her daughter, who is two, to the area, and on the day I met her, she had taken them to a place they knew – the stay-and-play centre in the Kensington Memorial Park on St Mark’s Road. Even that held uncomfortable memories: the last time they had been there, before the fire, Lasharie had seen a three-year-old girl who lived in Grenfell Tower. She was one of the estimated 80 victims who died in the blaze. “It doesn’t seem real,” said Lasharie, who is a Labour councillor for the Notting Dale ward, which includes the Lancaster West estate. “How can so many people have been taken from us? It feels like it didn’t happen – and yet that night is always with me, especially at night when I try and sleep.” ▶

▶ **T**he Lancaster West Estate was built between 1972 and 1974. It was just a stone's throw from the newly opened Westway, a 3.5-mile-long elevated dual carriageway, which was constructed in the manner envisaged by the Swiss-French modernist architect Le Corbusier some 30 years earlier. Le Corbusier believed the ageing cities of Europe had to be radically remade to meet the demands of the machine age, and he wanted to separate traffic and pedestrians by building raised carriageways and clearing houses to make way for skyscrapers, with citizens living "in peace and pure air... under the foliage of green trees".

being brought to close it again. Media coverage of the opening ceremony concentrated on the plight of the people who lived within sight of the road, and the transport minister said that he hoped "those who use this road will spare a thought for those for whom it is not a blessing".

The idea of a raised street around the estate, allowing pedestrians to walk on a level above the cars, was abandoned. So was the proposed shopping centre and office complex. Yet there were traces of the Corbusian vision of the "city in the park" in the communal gardens between the three "finger blocks", including the one Beina-zir Lasharie's family would live in, and the

she has spent most of her time trying to help people deal with mice infestations or leaking pipes. The hot water and heating for the entire estate was provided by massive gas boilers in the basement of Grenfell Tower, and these would often go off at the weekend. Joe Delaney, a resident of Barandon Walk, one of the other finger blocks at the foot of the tower, used to work in risk and insurance at Brent Council and understands the workings of local councils; he said there was never any chance of it being fixed before Monday morning. If you wanted to have a bath, you had to boil kettles, he told me, when I met him at the hotel in Hammersmith where he has been staying since the night of the fire.

Delaney believed that the neglect of the estate became worse as the surrounding area got richer. "There is a direct relationship between gentrification and the level of services the council provides to social housing tenants," he says. The slum houses demolished to make way for the estate would now be worth millions. What one resident called "Goldman Sachs land" lies a few hundred metres east, towards Ladbroke Grove. To the north, the 19th-century "Potteries and Piggeries" slum that produced the bricks for London's suburban expansion has become equally exclusive – the Earl of Zetland pub, which stands on the corner of Pottery Lane, beside the area's last remaining kiln, now houses an asset management company.

Yvette Williams, one of the founders of the campaign group Justice4Grenfell, lives on the other side of the Westway in a house that backs on to an oligarch's home, which is two houses knocked into one. When their new neighbour moved in, Williams's five-year-old daughter looked through the windows and said their chandelier was "as big as the moon". They saw a black man in the garden once and they thought he was a spy in the world of absentee millionaires. Then they saw the uniform and realised he was serving drinks.

Everyone was aware of the growing disparities, and no one knew how to address them. Lasharie remembered "lecturing" a group of local boys who were sitting in the gardens of the walkway smoking weed, saying that they had to get involved in politics if they wanted things to change.

"I said you need to be leaders, you need to get involved if you want to make a difference – you can't sit on the outside shouting." She told one of the boys, Yasin el-Wahabi, that she had become a councillor just like her father, despite not being a natural politician. He could do the same, she said. Wahabi lived on the 21st floor of Grenfell Tower. Along with his parents and his younger brother and sister, he died in the fire.

KCTMO wasn't run on behalf of the tenants, or by the tenants, but to manage the tenants, several people said

The *New Scientist* was so enthused by the Corbusian ideals that it proposed the Westway should be built across London's rooftops. The "roof road" would reduce pollution and congestion, and make life in our cities "civilised and tranquil" again, the magazine claimed, though there was no need for such imaginative solutions in the streets of North Kensington, which had long been marked for demolition. The former Labour home secretary Alan Johnson grew up in a street off Golborne Road in the 1950s that had been condemned in the 1930s; while the author Colin MacInnes branded the streets that would be cleared to make way for the Lancaster West Estate the "sinisterest" in London. They ran off Latimer Road "like horrible tits dangling from a lean old sow", he wrote in *Absolute Beginners*, a novel set during the 1958 race riots in "the stagnating slum" of Notting Hill. "There's only one thing to do with them, absolutely one, which is to pull them down," he wrote.

In 1966, the *Architectural Review* predicted that the Lancaster West Estate would be a "splendid surprise". Yet by the time work began, faith in the modernist principles that inspired its original design had declined. In May 1968, the east side of a tower block called Ronan Point, in Canning Town, east London, had collapsed, claiming four lives, raising doubts about the viability of high-rise living. And the opening of the Westway had revealed the fundamental flaw in the Corbusian vision: as the longest stretch of raised motorway in Europe, it was an engineering triumph, and yet within weeks of its opening, there was talk of an injunction

construction of the 24-storey tower in the northwest corner of the estate. The finger blocks were conceived as tower blocks on their side, with walkways like the "streets in the sky" made famous in brutalist buildings such as Sheffield's Park Hill. The flats were built according to Parker Morris standards, which specified minimum dimensions, and had become mandatory for all new housing built in Britain by 1969. Many were maisonettes, arranged over two floors, and they all had their own balconies. Lasharie remembers it as a good place to grow up: she recalls her mother buying milk, bread and orange juice from the milk float that used to run down the walkways.

Over the years structural changes and lack of care reduced the estate's appeal. The police believed that the walkways in the finger blocks had become rat runs for drug dealers and other petty criminals, and in the early 1990s they installed walls breaking the walkways into shorter sections. More recently, the entrances that used to connect the walkways to Grenfell Tower were sealed off or removed. But it was the lack of maintenance that upset people most. It became commonplace to say that the Kensington and Chelsea Tenant Management Organisation (KCTMO), which was set up in 1996 to run the council's housing stock, ignored the interests of the tenants. It wasn't run on behalf of the tenants, or by the tenants, but to manage the tenants, several people said. Lasharie made the same point more forcefully: "KCTMO just think these people are nothing: they don't matter."

She was elected a councillor for the Notting Dale ward in May 2014, and since then



Caption to in here

On the railings outside Latimer Road Underground station, among the posters of the Grenfell missing persons, was a sheet of paper. It listed the names of the board members of the KCTMO – and their salaries. The leaflet noted that Robert Black, the chief executive, earned £160,000 and lived in a £1 million home. (“8 years in role” it added, to emphasise his culpability). Two weeks after the fire, KCTMO said that Black was “to step aside” so “that he can concentrate on assisting with the investigation and inquiry”, and at the end of July the police said that there were “reasonable grounds” to suspect the Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea and KCTMO may have committed corporate manslaughter.

Six weeks had passed since the fire, and specialist officers were still sifting through the contents of the tower, including the remains of many of those who died. The lower floors were still clad in white and grey tiles, but those further up were buckled and yellowed. Men in white suits and blue face masks were working in the lowest line of blackened windows. I had seen the tower many times on TV, and from the Westway at night, when its outline was an inky hole in the sodium-softened grey that passes for darkness in London, but it was still a shock to see it close up. It was raining, but from certain angles the mist drifting past the blackened frame looked like smoke. After 9/11, the twin towers of the World Trade Center were an absence, a charged emptiness in the Manhattan air, but Grenfell Tower is an unmistakable presence – and will remain so

for some time: the process of “wrapping” its blistered facade has begun, but it will be months before the tower is taken down, and in the meantime it is still attracting visitors. As I circled the police barriers that had been thrown up around it, pausing before the “missing” posters and yellow ribbons that formed a secondary cordon, I kept passing other people doing the same. You can tell the locals, people said, because they don’t look up at the tower: they don’t want to see it any more.

I walked down Bramley Road and turned left into Silchester Road, which runs past the Kensington Aldridge Academy, the new school at the foot of Grenfell Tower. “Join a world class 6th form”, said the banner on top of the building, but the school was closed, its staff and students relocated to a temporary site. Police guarded the entrance to its grounds, which provide one of the few means of access to the tower; for it was built on the open space beneath it as part of the “regeneration” of the estate that culminated in the cladding of its facade.

I used to walk through the Lancaster West Estate every day in the late 1990s, when I was writing a book about the A40 titled *Leadville*. Every morning, I cycled past Latimer Road Tube and the unrenovated tower on my way from my flat in Shepherd’s Bush to the studio north of the Westway where I was working; and every afternoon, I walked through the estate to the old Kensington Leisure Centre to go swimming. I hadn’t been back since, and when I stood in front of the new leisure centre I found it hard to remember what the old one had looked like: the new building had absorbed the car park

in front of the low, flat-roofed shed, and it was enlarged again by the vanes that frilled its exterior, stark-white against the frame of Grenfell Tower.

Inside, there were three pools grouped along a large lobby, a gym on the first floor and a deep, cavernous sports hall, where three people were playing badminton. The old changing room, where I once found myself sitting next to Damon Albarn, then in a relative lull between Britpop and Gorillaz, had been replaced by the modern system of unisex and family cubicles. I used to chat to the man who had painted the mural on the end wall of the old pool, but the new wall was scrupulously unadorned and the chlorinated water held no sense of time or place: the shouts echoing from the cantilevered roof reminded me of other pools I had swum in but not the one that used to occupy the same patch of ground. It took me the best part of a morning to reorientate myself in the streets as well – though the permanent changes were obscured by the temporary ones erected since the fire, in the form of the barriers at the base of the tower – and I found it hard to untangle the ways in which they might have shaped each other.

To some, the purpose of the “regeneration” was clear. The council’s long-term aim was “to inhumanely socially cleanse the majority of Lancaster West estate and other social housing in North Kensington”, wrote the founders of Grenfell Action Group (GAG) in 2012. The group was run by two men, Ed Daffarn, who lived on the 16th floor of Grenfell Tower, and Francis O’Connor, a previous tenant who now lives in Ireland, and their angry posts have been widely quoted since the fire. In 2014, they wrote to the London Fire Brigade to say they believed “the new improvement works to Grenfell Tower have turned our building into a fire trap”, and in November 2016, they warned it would probably take “a serious fire in a tower block or similar high density residential property” to “shine a light on the practices that characterise the malign governance” of the KCTMO, and see its management “brought to justice”.

They objected to the original plans to demolish Grenfell Tower and Barandon Walk and build some private homes. They also objected to the final proposal to rebuild the Kensington Leisure Centre and build the new school on Lancaster Green, on the grounds that it would irrevocably alter the nature of the estate by swallowing up the “cherished parkland” and the “beloved green space” at the foot of the tower. People had taken this “beautiful island sanctuary of green” for granted, they acknowledged – but when they knew it was going to disappear, they recognised what they had lost. ▶

► It wasn't only the increased fire risks that threatened their safety, but the overcrowding that the "regeneration" caused. Delaney, who has become the main proponent of GAG's views in the aftermath of the fire, said that "no one wanted the school" and claimed the tenants had always said it was dangerous to leave only a single narrow road leading to the tower. Delaney, who filmed the fire engines backing up on Grenfell Road on the night of the fire, said the first ones arrived within eight minutes, but couldn't get in. He saw people doing three-point turns to get their cars out of their way.

Not everyone accepts his version of events. Robert Atkinson, Lasharie's colleague in the Notting Dale ward, said the school was the product of more than 20 years' campaigning by the Labour group on the council, which realised there were not going to be enough school places in North Kensington and set about providing more. The school was "slotting into the ward" on the only available site, he said, when I met him at the offices of Karen Buck MP, where he works. "It was built in Notting Dale to serve Notting Dale and Lancaster West," he said. Its intake was so local that five of its pupils died in the fire.

Atkinson is proud of the school and rejects most of Daffarn and GAG's complaints: he says the green space was of little benefit to anyone and the reworked roads made no difference on the night of the fire. Yet he acknowledged that there did turn out to be "an element of truth" in some of what Daffarn had said. "Those allegations of social – and therefore ethnic – cleansing are absolutely true," he said. He doesn't blame the tenants for not trusting the council, though he pointed out the dilemma it faces: "If you are not going to provide for housing out of central government funds, where are you going to get the money to renew the estates? So there is an argument for a certain amount of private housing in the same development."

Yet GAG was right to argue the residents were treated "abominably", because the building work dragged on for much longer than it should. The renovation of the tower was supposed to run concurrently with the construction of the school and the leisure centre, but the contracts were mishandled and the residents were subjected to seven years of "building stress", which had only just ended when they were subjected to the infinitely greater trauma of the fire.

headlights," he said. He wasn't surprised that it had failed to cope, but he thought it was "inexcusable" that it didn't ask for help. The council struggled for five or six days, until Downing Street realised it "wasn't coping", and "forced in" Gold Command – an emergency task force composed of executives from other London boroughs, government staff, NHS workers and British Red Cross volunteers – to take over.

Elizabeth Campbell, the new leader of the council, has said that it will spend its reserves on rehousing those affected. Residents of the tower were not the only ones affected: people speak of a "widening ring of trauma" that takes in the finger blocks and the houses in streets surrounding streets, where residents complain of soot-blackened air and the disruptive presence of the police. Some people do not want to go back, Atkinson says; others want to return but will not live above a certain floor. Delaney is waiting for the assurance that the tower is safe before he returns to his flat in Barandon Walk. "I want to get on with my life," he said. "And I'm even more keen to live there now I've seen the way people responded to the fire. I'm drunk on community spirit – and I want to stay drunk."

Lasharie also wants to go back, though she fears that it will not be the same as before. "No one knows what will become of it," she said. "Most of my neighbours have moved out. No one's there any more. People have been divided: we keep in touch via WhatsApp but we used to keep in touch by just opening our front door and having a chat – nothing beats that." Atkinson hopes that the tragedy may provide a turning point of a sort, by inspiring a national building programme and transforming the attitudes towards social housing that led, directly or indirectly, to the fire. "The privatisation of public services, the running down of public services and the sheer contempt for local government shown by central government – this is what it leads to."

Even in its blackened form, the tower is a testament to the building standards of a different time, for despite being engulfed by flames that reached 1,000 degrees C, it did not fall down and it will have to be dismantled floor-by-floor. Some people want to see the site turned into a garden, but Delaney says that would only give the council what it wants. "The reason it was clad in the first place was to make it look pretty – and you want to give them a garden? Those people died because people thought the land they lived on was worth more than they are." The only way to commemorate the victims is to build another tower in its place, he says. "Build social housing there. It's the only fitting memorial." ●

The failings of the council were most apparent on the day after the fire. There was no one from the council to be seen, said Yvette Williams. She spent the first day at the Latymer Christian Centre on Bramley Road, and the next two at Bay 56, a vacant space beneath the Westway that was taken over by a local trust in the early Seventies, sorting children's clothes and other donations. "We were literally running the People's Republic of Ladbroke Grove," Williams said. There are local precedents for entities such as those: the Free and Independent Republic of Frestonia, which grew out of a squatted enclave at the southern end of Latimer Road after it was cut off by the Westway, was a five-minute walk away. Yet the community organisation that Williams detected was not a countercultural project that flourished partly because it was overlooked: it was an urgent response to a disaster, compounded by a municipal nervous breakdown.

Atkinson, who sits on the council's adult social care and health scrutiny committee and the schools forum, said that large parts of the council "ceased to function". He praised the department responsible for children and education for providing an extensive counselling programme and said that adult social care worked well, but the emergency plan failed, and housing collapsed. "They were like rabbits caught in

AD
1/6 vertical
features