

Grenfell: Tombstone to a Megalomaniac Dream

By Christopher Booker

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It was certainly an ominous coincidence that 1974, the year Grenfell Tower was opened was also the year that Hollywood released what was arguably the most famous "disaster movie" ever made, *The Towering Inferno*. On Wednesday, as we woke up to the horror of what was happening, I received an email that added another curious detail to this awful story.

It was from the man who back in the Seventies sold to the local council the original cladding for Grenfell Tower. As he explained, it consisted of Glasal panels in which were sealed white asbestos cement, so tightly compressed that no fibres could escape.

"It was totally safe," he told me, "and would certainly have stopped the spread of any external fire; unlike this new cladding, which contains combustible plastics which can spread a fire up a building so fast that in some countries it has already caused whole buildings to go up, and in others it has been banned."

A much more immediately relevant point, however, on which the forthcoming inquiry will certainly have to focus, is what might be called the "European" dimension to this tragedy. So far wholly missed has been the fact that making construction regulations, including those relating to fire risk, is an exclusive "competence" of the EU. Britain has no right to make its own, without Brussels permission.

Furthermore in 2014 the Department of Energy and Climate Change issued its National Energy Efficiency Action Plan, setting out how it planned to meet its EU targets for reducing "carbon emissions" (and also those set under our own Climate Change Act).

In particular, it emphasised the need to comply with EU directive 2012/27 on "energy efficiency". This explained that the top priority was to improve the insulation of buildings, responsible for 40 per cent of all emissions. Local authorities were thus made aware of the section on renovating older buildings.

When Kensington and Chelsea council chose the new cladding for Grenfell Tower it would, therefore, have known that top of the list was the need for "thermal efficiency". On this score, plastics such as polyurethane, polyethaline or polyisocyanate rated most highly, despite their fire risk. There was even financing available under the government's Green Deal scheme.

I long ago took a personal interest in the estate on which Grenfell stands, when I spent much of the Seventies investigating the disaster that had been inflicted on so many cities by the Sixties mania for massive "comprehensive redevelopment schemes" and giant council tower blocks.

When I began in 1972 with a book called 'Goodbye London: An Illustrated Guide to Threatened Buildings', listing all the demolition schemes then planned across London, it opened with a page of pictures showing the vast area of pleasant, human-scale 19th century streets in north-west Kensington shortly to be demolished for the estate that would include Grenfell Tower.

By 1979, I had been commissioned by the BBC to make a two-hour television film, City of Towers, which for the first time told the whole story of how the destruction of our cities had been inspired by the megalomaniac dream in the Twenties of the Swiss architect Le Corbusier; and how this led 40 years later to those vast dehumanised council estates, dominated by tower blocks like Grenfell, half of which have since been demolished.

The way our politicians, national and local, were taken in by this maniacal vision was yet another perfect case-study in the deluding power of groupthink. As so often, a beguiling dream had led in reality to a nightmare. Grenfell Tower stands today as the most chilling tombstone yet to that crazed dream.
