

The CULTURE PAGES

CRITICS

Justin Davidson on the grim politics of public housing ... Christian Lorentzen on *Dear Cyborgs*, a post-Occupy novel ... Craig Jenkins on the second coming of Lorde.



ARCHITECTURE / JUSTIN DAVIDSON

Flames of Contempt

The Grenfell Tower fire wasn't just a tragedy—it was the physical manifestation of political neglect.

THERE IS NO SUCH THING as an accident when a high-rise building fails. If gas leaks, wires spark, or a wall crumbles, it is not an act of fate but the preventable consequence of people not doing their jobs.

It's too soon to be sure exactly what caused Grenfell Tower in London to burn out of control on June 14, killing at least 79 people and incinerating bodies so badly they can't be identified. As survivors camp out in hotels and neighbors' apartments, living on donated food, water, and clothing, a thick plume of accusations suggests a lot of possible culprits and outlines a plausible narrative. A faulty refrigerator likely started the fire, which spread to the recently installed cladding of cheap aluminum panels with a flammable core. The gap between the wall and the rainscreen cladding may have created a chimney effect, speeding flames and smoke up the building's exterior. With ineffectual alarms, residents found them-

selves trapped as smoke blocked off the lone fire stair. There were no sprinklers.

Behind the technical factors lies another layer of social and political issues. Long before the flames broke out, residents accused building management and authorities of ignoring their chillingly specific complaints, perhaps because of a generalized disinterest in the building's poor and largely immigrant population, or because of the pressures of gentrification from the neighborhood all around. The fire produced one of those devastating moments when we saw "the authorities" for the hapless human beings they often are. If disaster strikes in a major Western capital, we expect grim-faced professionals to tell us the truth and know what to do next. Instead, politicians paraded in front of television cameras to perform a kind of governmental improv act, doing half-baked impressions of deep concern, determination, and sympathy. The truth is that both officials and private entities had plenty of

PHOTOGRAPH: NATALIE OXFORD/TWITTER

warning and innumerable opportunities to forestall cataclysm. The laminate panels on Grenfell Tower's skin were also involved in at least five catastrophic fires in Dubai. And yet in the U.K. and elsewhere, the community of architects, engineers, regulators, façade consultants, and construction firms continues to permit their use.

New Yorkers might be tempted to react complacently. Aluminum panels are common, but the slightly cheaper version with the flammable polyethylene core is not legal here. All buildings higher than 55 feet must have automatic sprinklers and two fire stairs, not one. And yet to argue those points is to miss the larger awfulness of the situation. Whether the proximate causes turn out to be corruption, venality, racism, or some combination of all three, the underlying sin is contempt for the people who must live in conditions they cannot control.

Housing the poor is, or should be, a national duty. It is also burdensome and inefficient, a problem that many politicians are constantly trying to slough off. After years of official impatience with a system that kept millions in chronically shoddy rentals, the British government has been trying to sell off its stock of housing to tenants and private landlords. In the case of Grenfell Tower, the local council outsourced management to a private entity, Kensington and Chelsea Tenants Management Organisation, which hired the contractor Rydon to overhaul the building, which in turn hired the cladding company Harley Facades. All could face criminal charges. Yet it could well be that everyone involved followed the letter of the law, abiding by regulations they knew to be deficient and that politicians couldn't be bothered to update. Nobody seems to have been fully in charge of ensuring the tenants' safety.

Confusion can kill. Building in any major city, especially New York, means negotiating an obstacle course of arcane regulations, protests, and financial calculations. Understanding the rules is tedious and daunting; abiding by them can be expensive. But the Grenfell Tower fire is a reminder that well-ordered society does not exist only to make life difficult for vigorous can-do types and populist politicians who look at regulatory agencies and see only red tape in need of cutting. It is also a reminder of the need for clarity. Days after the fire, British officials still seemed unsure about whether the cladding was legal or not.

Contempt also shapes official attitudes to public housing in the United States. It explains why President Trump appointed Ben Carson, a doctor with no expertise or avowed interest in housing issues, to run the nation's Department of Housing and Urban Development. Contempt explains why he named Lynne Patton, a family loyalist who plans

weddings and golf tournaments, to run the New York–New Jersey section of HUD. These are not casual appointments: They send a clear signal that public-housing residents deserve no better.

NYCHA, an agency responsible for the living conditions of more than half a million New Yorkers, is in such deep financial distress that its buildings have been allowed to decline into lethal states of disrepair. In 2015, a malfunctioning elevator killed 84-year-old Olegario Pabon. A fire in another apartment killed two toddler sisters, Amanda and Janubi Jabie, after a maintenance worker noticed a malfunctioning smoke detector and did nothing. In 2014, a panicked cop in a stairwell darkened by burned-out bulbs fired a shot that killed 28-year-old Akai Gurley. The fact that these deaths occur one or two at a time, instead of in one catastrophic blaze, does not mitigate their horror.

No government agency even builds public housing much anymore; instead, all three levels of government subsidize private developers or mission-driven nonprofit organizations. In New York, many of these apartments are "affordable" in only the loosest sense of the word. Still, at least we're trying. New construction is usually adequate, robust, and managed by owners who have an incentive to keep their properties from falling apart. And sometimes public need, government subsidies, and private interests can merge in complicated transactions that have simple outcomes: a better life for residents.

Facing a resistant Congress, the Obama administration created a new mechanism to support public housing: Rental Assistance Demonstration (RAD). That meaningless

string of words denotes a program that has allowed NYCHA to create a public-private partnership, bundling Section 8 vouchers, federal-tax credits, direct subsidies, state bonds, bank loans, and private investment—\$560 million in all—to renovate Ocean Bay Apartments in Far Rockaway, which were severely damaged by Superstorm Sandy. The funds will pay to freshen up nearly 1,400 apartments but also for rooftop boilers, elevated electrical systems, generators, and a landscaped flood wall. The various sources of money come with layers of accountability: banks, government agencies, and insurance companies all send their own inspectors and engineers to the site on a regular basis. That's the win-win theory, anyway: permanently affordable housing rejuvenated and made safe, at no extra cost to tenants or the federal government. Some tenants fear the fine print and may have their skepticism reinforced by a Trump administration that sees in RAD one of the only housing programs it hopes to expand rather than cut.

It's easy to malign the architecture of public-housing projects as inherently inhumane. Many Americans see public housing as a machine for converting public funds into pathologies. Yet hundreds of thousands of New Yorkers continue to live in these buildings from another era, many more dwell in privately managed squalor, and 60,000 have no home at all. Even thousands of miles away, the Grenfell Tower blaze casts a ghoulish light on the importance of government's least glamorous task: to fix what is broken for those who need it most. Because neglect is the moral equivalent of murder. ■

BOOKS / CHRISTIAN LORENTZEN

We Can Be Heroes

A new novel engages the post-Occupy moment.

EUGENE LIM'S *Dear Cyborgs* is a novel of ideas, small, elegant ideas about art and protest, and one of the most striking literary works to emerge from the Occupy movement. (Poets like Juliana Spahr have so far excelled fiction writers in this category.) The cyborgs of the title are, of course, just us, gripping our prosthesis phones, speeding down the highways and through the air in aluminum-and-steel containers, wrapped in an internet of things. The novel is bookended by the story of a pair of friends, the unnamed narrator and Vu, sons of Asian immigrants (South Korean and Vietnamese, respectively) growing up in Ohio. They bond over comic books

DEAR CYBORGS
BY EUGENE LIM.
FSG ORIGINALS.
163 PAGES.
\$14.