

London, it's the year 2017 and 72 people perish trapped in an apartment block covered in flammable cladding. Valencia, it's the year 2024 and 10 people perish trapped in an apartment block covered in flammable cladding. The corporations and authorities responsible for allowing this to happen will speculate on the causes, delay the findings of their inquiries, and then try to water down the subsequent recommendations, but we have precedent and the issue is clear; cost-cutting kills.

The horror of waking up on Friday morning and seeing images of a block of flats engulfed in flames and reports of people trapped, dead or missing and automatically knowing the culprit: 'highly flammable cladding'. London suffered its own tragedy in 2017 losing 72 lives in the Grenfell Tower fire that raged for 60 hours and whose devastation has largely been attributed to the use of cheaper building materials. The shadow of this tragedy has hung over UK politics as the fight for accountability and justice drags into its seventh year. The UK Fire Brigades Union issued a clear statement comparing the two tragedies, highlighting that the Valencia fire spread quickly because of flammable cladding, and that lives had been lost as a result. The union, representing 33 000 firefighters in the UK, added that "once again, we see the profits of developers being prioritised over human life".

As details become clearer we now know that the fire started at 17:30 on Thursday in a 14-storey building in the Campanar neighbourhood of Valencia and spread to an adjoining block. There is yet no confirmation on the cause of the fire. 10 people died and residents reported that the blaze engulfed the building rapidly, in about 30 minutes.

How did the fire spread so quickly leading to such tragic consequences? According to experts including Esther Puchades, VP of the College of Industrial Technical Engineers of Valencia and Luis Sendra of Valencia's architects' association, highly flammable cladding on the building allowed the fire to spread rapidly as it uses polyurethane which ignites at high temperatures.

While experts feel confident in suggesting that cladding contributed to the devastatingly rapid spread of the blaze, Valencia's own Mayor, María José Catalá, said that it was too early to comment on whether some materials used in the construction of the buildings might have worsened it. While construction industry voices have rejected "attacks" against the material. It is convenient to talk about how 'complicated' this situation might be, that we must patiently wait for inquiries before rushing to conclusions, but that serves to benefit those responsible rather than victims. Of course official investigations must be respected, but this fire didn't happen in a vacuum, politicians may act shocked but we are not without precedent. The idea that flammable cladding is a major factor in the seriousness of the fire is gaining traction, but the question of *why* flammable cladding was used, or

is still allowed to be in use, has been overlooked. It is here that we can bring in the experience of Grenfell.

The fire which destroyed the Grenfell Tower in June 2017 was one of the UK's worst modern disasters. It broke out in the kitchen of a fourth floor flat just before 01:00, in West London. Within minutes, the fire rapidly ascended the exterior of the building and within two hours most of the upper floors were well alight, killing 72 people. Unlike the building in Valencia, which was private residential properties, Grenfell was social housing administered by the local council.

A public inquiry was ordered by then Prime Minister, Theresa May and split into two parts. Phase One dealt with what happened on the night and was released in October 2019 finding systematic failures in the firefighter response. Phase Two, which looks at the building's refurbishment and external cladding, has been delayed in releasing its findings. It was initially supposed to be published in the Autumn of 2023 but it has yet to appear meaning potential criminal prosecutions for manslaughter, fraud and health and safety offences will also be delayed as the Crown Prosecution Service is waiting for publication before deciding on charges.

Even though the full findings of the inquiry have yet to be published 7 years later, hearings concluded in Autumn 2022. The inquiry was told by expert witnesses that the construction industry had been geared towards cost-cutting and "value-engineering" - a buzz-word for providing necessary functions in a project at a lower cost - over safety. What's more, the public inquiry was told of a secret meeting to cut refurbishment costs, including discussing the switch to cheaper cladding, between the company which operated the social housing tower block for the local council, and the contractor, Rydon. They agreed more than £800,000 in savings and Rydon subsequently agreed to cut the cost of windows and switch more expensive zinc cladding panels for the aluminium alternatives which became a principal cause of the spread of the June 2017 fire. The cheaper panels were combustible and the installation failed essential measures to prevent fire spread. This cutting of corners was allowed to happen in a greater context of 20 years of softening of building and fire safety regulations by successive governments.

The tragedy of Grenfell had a wider effect on European regulation and the suspected cladding in the Valencia fire has been banned in Spain since 2019. However, nothing has been done to strip older buildings of its use, which is what Britain is now doing, albeit slowly. Lessons learned must match action to remove dangerous materials from our housing stock as the fact this type of tragedy has not happened more frequently is not by design but by luck.

Although one was council-owned and housed some of the most vulnerable people in our communities and the other private residences, fetching €300,000 in a privileged

neighbourhood, their fate was the same which testifies to the widespread and rampant practice of cost-cutting at the expense of safety.

Perhaps the example of Grenfell can help focus the argument for Valencia. It is not a coincidence that the more important part of the Grenfell Public Inquiry, which could result in serious consequences for those responsible, has still not been released so that the public's memory may fade and the issue become diluted with time. Questions in Spain need to be asked as to why it was seen as acceptable to leave cladding on inhabited buildings when it is known how dangerous the consequences could be.

London and Valencia have been twinned by tragedy, a tragedy that was wholly avoidable and in which profit was put above people. As the UK Fire Brigades Union ended their statement this weekend: We demand action and justice.