



Toward Cultural Change in the Construction Sector

The Building Safety Network

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Introduction

“ . . . it is in the very process of dwelling that we build.” Ingold (1995: 78)

Over recent years criticism surrounding the state of the UK construction industry has become ever more acute. The quality of construction, the ability of housing management companies to maintain people’s homes, rising costs for tenants and lease holders, and troubling standards of building quality have all been highlighted as growing areas of national concern. Not only is it the immediate physical hazards that unsafe buildings pose that may cause harm but the mental toll it takes on people that are living in these conditions can be highly damaging to residents’ wellbeing (e.g. Preece 2021). Eventually in 2017 the tragedy of the Grenfell Tower fire would fully draw the attention of the world’s media and the wider public towards the deficiencies of the housing system and provoke an urgent review of the legislature governing the housing sector. Reflecting on the problems endemic in the sector, Michael Gove would go on to assert that, “faulty and ambiguous (guidance and regulations) allowed unscrupulous people to exploit a broken system.”

As the primary piece of legislation that has emerged to address this “broken system” the Building Safety Act 2022 codifies the government’s response to the crisis and invites critical scrutiny. While it is difficult to say yet what the effectiveness of the BSA will be, aspects of the approach and potential efficacy in engendering change in the construction industry have been treated with some amount of scepticism. There are outstanding concerns that the Act does not go far enough in certain respects and may be too vague in others. Additionally, there remain worries that it might not be addressing the most apposite questions and so its outcomes might not ultimately prove to be of benefit to those people most effected by the sorts of institutional failures that lead to such disasters (Smith 2023).

As argued by Carr et al (2022) the legislative changes that have been brought about in response to the Grenfell disaster have failed to initiate the sort of radical change required in the institutional cultures pertaining to the UK construction industry. Rather than such a ‘paradigm shift’ the modes of change that are characterised in the passing of the Building Safety Bill represent an adjustment within the ‘normal frame’ of the industry (Kuhn 1962). That is to say they are incremental and operate in line with established ways of working, therefore serving to maintain the status quo of construction industry culture. While an incremental step in the right direction, the desire to effect change in the culture of the construction sector (as clearly expressed in the Hackitt review) may

not be possible with the sort of legislation the BSA represents and the sort of enforcement options open to the Health and Safety Executive (HSE) tasked with enforcing it. The act, and the manner in which it is to be enforced, represents a typically top-down approach to an issue which may require better established grass-roots representation, with a greater degree of power and agency granted to building users.

The position expressed this paper, and by the Building Safety Network, is that a more nuanced and integrated approach is required to underpin any response to the diverse array of issues afflicting the construction sector in the UK today. Such activities require joined-up and comprehensive research approaches, linking critically engaged social research that engages with a shifting political and socio-economic landscape with technical questions of structural integrity, material properties, analysis of procurement and construction process, and practice-orientated methodologies that ensure research leads to meaningful change in the sector.

With a more socially informed approach in mind, the following sections address the legislative reaction provoked by the Grenfell fire and the changes its authors hope it invokes in the current regime of construction and building management. It will discuss why this approach may be insufficient to ensure the safety and wellbeing of the those it aims to protect, and how engaging more deeply with concepts of 'culture' through currently untapped research methodologies may help to inform policy and legislature going forward for the benefit of those most negatively affected by the building crisis.

Criticisms of the construction sector culture

While the Grenfell fire was significant in its impact due to the scale of the tragedy and the way in which it thrust concerns regarding the safety of social housing into the wider public consciousness, it was not a unique event. Long before the Grenfell disaster the risks associated with current construction and fire safety practices were being observed and noted. In a submission of evidence to the Pre-Legislative Scrutiny of the government's draft Building Safety Bill, Hodgkinson and Murphy (2019) pointed to "a catastrophic compartmentation failure every 17 days on average - with every third incident affecting a high-rise building." Moreover, prior to the disaster, residents of Grenfell itself had expressed clear concerns regarding the safety of the building and the inaction of the building's management. Unfortunately, such warnings appeared to go unheeded, or in some cases were simply considered to be a nuisance (Roberts 2017). The fact that building safety breakdowns have occurred at the rate they have and that this has happened despite the awareness and raised concerns by building users post-Grenfell, has led to a widespread declaration of a 'crisis' in building safety and subsequent calls for urgent state intervention.

When disasters such as the tragedy at Grenfell occur they often represent a point of rupture in society, a critical juncture where the catastrophe lays bare inadequacies in established social systems that were previously obscured, or at least overlooked (Oliver-Smith 1996; Carr 2022). This reflection acts as an impetus for societal reflection and change, for the apportioning of blame and the correcting of faults in the hope that positive changes may be enacted so future disasters of a similar sort may be avoided (Perrow 1984; Hoffman 2002). For the state this is frequently through the enactment of a public inquiry, an opportunity for the governing institution to audit and rectify. Such an inquiry can also provide a focal point where the concerns and criticisms of the public, including both those directly affected by the catastrophe and the wider public, may be addressed (Tuitt 2019).

In the case of the Grenfell tower fire, the official mechanism by which this process was initiated was the Independent Review of Building Regulations and Fire Safety, led by Dame Judith Hackitt. This review aimed to prompt improvement in fire safety measures through an identification of systemic failures in the regulatory system for buildings. Its findings, in aiming to overhaul the system which had seemed to fail so disastrously, would go on to inform the creation of the Building

Safety Act, passed into law in 2022. The sentiment that there were serious, seemingly endemic, issues present in the UK construction sector was prominently noted in the Hackitt review, which specifically identified the following key areas that urgently needed to be addressed:

- **Responsibility and Accountability:** Firstly, the review identified a lack of clear roles and responsibilities for building safety. The report stressed the need for a culture where everyone involved in the building process is responsible and accountable for their actions.
- **Competence and Training:** There appeared to be a concerning lack of competence in the industry that emerged over the course of the review. To ensure that in future all those involved in building design, construction, and maintenance have the necessary skills and knowledge the report called for improvement in training and qualifications.
- **Collaboration and Communication:** The report identified that the industry lacked a coherent and joined-up culture and that there was a clear need for better collaboration and communication within the industry. It suggested that a more integrated approach with all parties working closely throughout a building's lifecycle, would improve safety standards.
- **Compliance and Ethics:** The review criticised the prevalent attitude towards compliance which, it stated, often aims for minimum standards rather than prioritising safety. It called for a shift towards a more ethically led approach, where safety is not just a regulatory requirement but a fundamental principle.
- **Transparency and Engagement:** The review highlighted the need for greater transparency and resident engagement in the construction and maintenance of buildings. This includes giving residents a voice in safety matters and ensuring they have access to relevant information about their homes: "Residents should be involved in the decision-making process for work that can impact on the safety of their homes" (Hackitt 2018: 64).

These findings would inform the drafting of the Building Safety Bill, feedback on which would highlight several perceived weaknesses with its proposals. For instance, despite the Bill's attempts to ensure the competence of those involved with the construction process, questions remained whether the proposed provisions would go far enough in this regard (e.g. Spinardi 2019) leaving lingering doubts regarding the potency of the legislative measures going forward. There also remained a need for more specific and robust mechanisms to ensure residents are listened to and their safety concerns addressed, with a greater focus on transparency and the need for resident-

led organisations to play a role in the new regulatory system, as well as safeguards required to protect residents' rights. (see Hodkinson 2019; Preston 2019; Smith 2023).

Significantly, beyond these specific and targeted criticisms of the Building Safety Bill, the issues raised over the course of the review were connected by a conspicuous and recurrent overarching theme: that what would fundamentally underpin meaningful improvement and reform was the requirement to induce 'culture change' within the industry. Specifically, in the report 'Building a Safer Future', Dame Judith Hackitt drew attention to "a cultural issue across the sector which can be described as a 'race to the bottom' caused either through ignorance, indifference, or because the system does not facilitate good practice" (p.6). Repeated calls for a need to "drive culture change" in the industry are made throughout the document. Ultimately, it is this cultural imperative that underpins many of the aspirations of the Building Safety Act.

It is one step to identify cultural 'problems' but attempting to then change the culture of an organisation, let alone an entire sector, can be one of the most difficult organisational tasks to successfully accomplish. Cultures form as a stabilising force in groups, generating group identities and notions of practices and behaviours considered beneficial for the group, and so are by their nature highly durable. Additionally, cultural traits rarely fall into the categories of simply positive or negative - often a trait that is beneficial in one context appears detrimental in another, so resistance to change can occur as "some behaviour that has become dysfunctional for us may, nevertheless, be difficult to give up and replace because it serves other positive functions." (Schein 2010: 301). This means that positive change can be difficult to initiate due to fear of negative outcomes, whether those fears be concrete or more nebulous. Given the inherent challenges that attempting to change institutional culture at a fundamental level represent, is it possible that current approaches, including the Building Safety Act, can truly achieve this goal?

Changing Culture

The Building Safety Act, as with any set of regulations, is an act of control. It derives its concepts of safety from a risk-management perspective where the goal is not to eliminate personal danger, but to control the probability that harmful events may occur. It is an approach that draws its core concepts not from efforts to preserve lives or physical wellbeing, but from the prudence of the financial sector, “with the use of market insurance to protect individuals and companies from various losses associated with accidents” (Dionne 2013). Risk management is, at its heart, a numbers game, where a boundary of acceptable risk is set, and provisions are put in place by an organisation to not exceed it. Regulation can be more stringent and extensive or more relaxed depending on what level of risk is considered tolerable and where this boundary of acceptability is reckoned to lie.

Despite its impersonality and apparent detachment from a concept of human wellbeing it is not to say there is no merit at all in this approach, it is at least a systematic way to go about things. But it does have its blind spots. What a risk-management based approach struggles to account for are the emergent and interactive processes of a life being lived - there is no inherent concept of this within the rubric of quantification and quantisation required to adequately assess and measure risk. Without space for the soft concepts of social reality within the risk management grid, there is a pool of lived experience – in this case, of a building – that is not being habitually tapped into. Indeed, often the only feedback that exists regarding existing construction problems are those that emerge due to the outcomes of tragedy - so, while the ACM cladding used at Grenfell was known to be combustible, manufacturers and contractors “took comfort from the fact that there hadn’t been a major disaster” as one expert witness would tell the Grenfell Tower Inquiry (Stein 2021). Despite residents already having raised multiple concerns it was only the hard numbers that set the boundaries of acceptable risk.

To an extent this is to be expected as for the most part the apparatus available to the government to address such a disaster lends itself to a similar sort of approach towards a solution. While exogenous 'shocks to the system' like the Grenfell fire can make possible the conditions under which change may be initiated - through the highlighting of systemic inadequacies and the increase in public pressure to amend the situation - the mechanisms by which the processes of change are to be mediated are products of the same institutional structures implicated in the problem. As

Cartwright (2021:81) puts it, in such situations culture change is "exogenously induced (through a crisis in the status quo) and endogenously mitigated (through existing institutions and their broader context)". To what extent can the BSA induce change, and to what extent does its nature as bureaucratic artifice mitigate it?

As discussed, organisational cultures are often durable because they have developed to operate for the benefit of the group and tend towards stability. The effect of a destabilising exogenous event may well be change - but it is change towards a reclamation of the prior equilibrium through incremental adjustment rather than progressive change through transformative upheaval. This is especially the case when endogenous pressures are operating on the system from within that still need to be accounted for. Existing risk factors, which also include commercial risk, financial risk or political risk, are processed through entrenched patterns of shared concepts and assumptions among the group that is the subject of change, and deviation from ingrained, ideologically informed, procedure frequently breeds anxiety, and resistance (Schein 2010).

Viewed in the spirit of the Hackitt review the goal with the new legislation is not only to rectify gaps in the previous rules which allowed unsafe practices to persist but also, through the enforcement of these new rules, to change the norms and values of the industry with the anticipated outcome being a change in behaviour. However, it does little to alter the endogenous pressures on government and construction companies which drive the internal culture of the sector and little to put into place systems which potentially allow for new perspectives on the problem which could genuinely impact cultural movement over time. The hopes for the bill in terms of cultural change may not be met with progressivism but with resistance, evasion or avoidance, as the aspirations of the bill collide with other, familiar, pressures on the sector. Should it also be experienced primarily as a purely disciplinary, or antagonistic regime by those entities it seeks to govern, by focusing on conspicuous performances of enforcement, it may induce reflexive pushback and a familiar desire to do the bare minimum to meet its requirements instead of a groundswell desire for constant improvement and lasting attitudinal change. What incentives, as well as disincentives, are there for positive change? In what way does the bill invoke long-term, aspirational ideas of building, and consequently residents', safety?

This language of 'aspirations' and 'ideas' can seem lofty, but they perform important roles in cultural change. Such concepts provide an imaginary against which the current state of affairs can be compared and act to align stakeholder thought across group boundaries (Schein 2010). An idea can act as a template, providing a frame in which political decisions are made (Steinmo 2008). The

Building Safety Act 2022 reflects a set of ideas acting as enframing devices which constrain and mitigate its form; ideas with roots in the liberalisation of building regulations through the latter half of the twentieth century in an effort to create “intentionally flexible, permissive, and subjective regulations and standards” (Carrington 2023). ‘Cutting red tape’ is an idea, an ideal even - flexibility, agility, competitiveness - a skein of concepts which become bundled up as an aspirational framework for institutional sense-making, and subsequently employed as guiding principles for action and legislation.

In the marketplace of ideas there are many options. Concepts such ‘sustainability’, or ‘resilience’, or even ‘net zero’ move through organisations first as propitious buzzwords, but their entry into the institutional lexicon at least demarcates avenues for realisation, bringing attention to complicated ideas where previously there was formlessness. So too the concept of ‘safety’ itself has often manifested as an idea with its passionate adherents (e.g. Harvey & Knox 2015: 118). Having these ideas and giving them name and form is vital, but through contact with inevitably contested and politically charged spaces their ultimate implementation may be compromised, attenuated or repurposed to fall in line with the grid of cultural constructs that drive an institution towards its goals, material or conceptual.

A critical juncture such as the one now faced by UK construction industry provides an opportunity to re-imagine the values, attitudes and ethical behaviours at the heart of the building safety system. It provides an opening to reconfigure the notion of ‘safety’ as it is imagined and practiced, and one that may be quite necessary. If prescriptive regulation is considered untenable, and objective-based legislation ineffectual then what form can the production of ‘safety’ take in an official capacity?

Towards the future

It was *hoped* that the shock of Grenfell would provoke meaningful change in the construction sector, for the benefit of the residents of such buildings across the country now, and into the future. Hope is important, it is a desire for something better, it suggests incompleteness and thus, potential (Bloch 1995). But on the other side of that coin is uncertainty and anxiety for what the future may hold. It is one thing to hope, and an entirely different thing to live in hope - one is a future-oriented position of critical optimism grounded in the understanding that a situation can be improved, the other an enduring sense of desperation where falling only a little short of a resignation to disenfranchisement (e.g. Stiegler 1998).

The Building Safety Act alone does not address the disenfranchisement of residents, because it treats them as exogenous factors, willing change on the industry from the outside instead of recognising them as endogenous aspects of the construction system. A building is not a home until it is lived in; dwelling is the practice in which the place is co-constituted. Successful homes are created when the links between design, construction and use are close. The noted lack of integration within the construction sector, running from planning through design and construction to dwelling generates residences with greater chances of failure as buildings and as homes, places where safety and security should be guaranteed. To address this requires a pro-active approach, rather than a post-hoc one and this means first envisaging what such a construction industry would be like, and what its culture may entail. Several aspects must be addressed for this to happen, including, but not limited to:

1. Acknowledgment must be made that operating solely through an adjustment or even upgrade of existing mechanisms of policing the industry will likely have little impact towards changing the industry, as they represent an internally generated reflexive response to restore a desirable form of the prior status quo, rather than a profound reinvention of the construction culture. As organisational cultures seek to self-stabilise according to endogenous pressures which affect them, without changing the industry in a meaningful way, the culture of the industry will not change, but rather trend back to a state which is most beneficial to it.
2. As a starting point a broader and more comprehensive notion of 'safety' must be developed, beyond simply that of meeting prescriptive or objective-based criteria. This should be built upon a better developed understanding of the conditions and modes of living, and how these can be

designed and built for. Home construction is the beginning of a process of living which is ultimately realised by homemakers so a greater acknowledgment of the co-constitutive processes of becoming that buildings and their occupants undergo throughout their lifespans needs to be developed and integrated into construction culture (e.g. Haraway 2016). This will be aided greatly by much closer interdisciplinary engagement between engineering, social science, arts and the humanities in order to bring different perspectives and new voices to the sector.

3. Given the above, it is clearly important to recognise residents and leaseholders as agents in this process, not as passive recipients or as a resource. Instead of being a simply a disengaged position of acceptance, the concept of 'trust' must be treated as a learned state of mind developed over time through continuous active engagement and reciprocal action and subsequent accumulated positive experience. Residents need to have a voice, but also feel that their voice is influential. The routes and mechanisms by which this occurs must be assessed and developed further to ensure that imbalance in power relations between individuals and entities in the resident/construction chain are better equalised.

The door remains open to enact the sort of adjustments to the current construction regime required to incorporate lived experience into the construction cycle. Aspects of the legislature (such as the proposed information management system termed 'the golden thread') remain ill defined, providing windows of opportunity to build better integration and access into the system, potentially providing both transparency and better routes for oversight and recourse for users at all stages of the construction process. To do so requires a more holistic view on designing these tools and procedures, with an increased interdisciplinary understanding of the social processes involved and the institutional structures that underpin (or undermine) them.

By stimulating new programmes of research activity the Building Safety Network aims to re-energise attempts to tackle entrenched problems within a sector that is scarred by the tragedy at Grenfell and stymied by fragmented relationships between designers, constructors, building owners, managers, and residents. The network's activities will be set within a genuinely transdisciplinary environment, bridging the expertise of the School of Engineering and the School of Social Sciences with the needs of building residents. The BSN will create a community of UK-based expertise, engaging experts from fields ranging from high-risk safety engineering to anthropology of the built environment to amplify interdisciplinary research approaches to building safety and promote knowledge exchange across boundaries to address under-explored dimensions of risk, trust, quality, procurement, management, and transparency.

All building residents deserve peace of mind, they should not have to live in fear of their homes not being safe, and they should also feel that if there are concerns that these will be addressed effectively and in a timely manner. Only through an integrated and socially informed programme of research, which engages at all levels with scholars, policy makers, industry and building users can the systemic, structural and cultural issues which affect the sector be addressed and confidence in the sector be restored

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