

“Grenfell changes everything?” Post-disaster agency beyond hope and despair

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The horror of the devastating Grenfell Tower fire, and the shock that 'it could happen here', in 21st century Britain, led politicians, professionals, and community workers to proclaim that 'Grenfell changes everything'. Affected people, turned into activists by the disaster, committed to ensuring that such a disaster could never happen again, by demanding changes to regulations and policy, putting hope into action. As time moves on, and such hope is undermined by the refusal of sidestepping of the demands, a sense of despair at structural inertia would be warranted. The experience of activism after Grenfell has been characterised by frustrating partial wins, inertia, delay, and setback. This paper seeks to theorise the activist condition of seeking change that is refused, and to do so in a way that values the agency and care of (thwarted) activism. Inspired by Haraway's 'staying with the trouble' and critical scholarship on hope, and drawing on 3 years of knowledge exchange and ethnographic engagement with the community response after Grenfell, I explore the trajectories of six activist change efforts: a fire safety campaign, engagements with a Public Inquiry, campaigns to preserve community assets, community gardening, silent walks, and provision of support to children at a community centre, each 'staying with the trouble' in different ways. I argue that set-backs do not invalidate a struggle or warrant despair, but that in insisting on caring for others' lives, activism succeeds in instantiating a caring world. Beyond hope and despair is the staying power of communities who value human life and solidarity and keep fighting for them.

Rethinking disasters and social change: Beyond hope and despair