

Flora Cornish

Cathy Long

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How we make history together – Exhibiting the local aftermath of Grenfell

Having documented the community response after the Grenfell Tower fire, Flora Cornish and Cathy Long recently hosted an interactive exhibition in the local area. They suggest how the collaborative creation of archives can support local sense-making post-disaster and aid preparation for future crises.

In the aftermath of the Grenfell Tower Fire on June 14th 2017, the local community began to gather to help their friends, neighbours and relatives. By the end of Day One, donations were piled high in community centres and places of worship. Amid a sense of chaos, and the absence of a visible, official co-ordinated response, the community stepped in.

In the days that followed, the area became a public canvas on which residents displayed their feelings. Alongside the 'missing' posters made by friends and relatives desperate for news of their loved ones, slogans and pleas for change began to appear. Billboards, pavements, railings, church steps and walls were filled with signs of anger and calls for change. The green heart quickly became a symbol of grief and sorrow but also of belonging, solidarity and community strength. The tower itself would become a vehicle for projecting green light, a powerful statement on London's skyline.

As a local resident and volunteer, Cathy instinctively began to document the ephemeral works of art appearing in the area. In the following months we developed a research and knowledge exchange project, interviewing community responders and those in authority, and collating evidence of the many hundreds of events, activities and milestones in the aftermath.

While official responses are documented in press releases, reports, and meeting minutes, community responses are less formally recorded, scattered across people's smartphones and memories. We drew from our conversations with community responders to produce an archive, and

eventually, a timeline representing what it was like to live in a community experiencing disaster 'recovery'.

Photo credits, Cathy Long.

An interactive exhibition

Seven and a half years later, in November 2024, we hosted a public, interactive exhibition at **The Tabernacle**, an arts and cultural centre less than a mile from Grenfell Tower. Titled 'Grenfell: Writing on the Wall', the exhibition displayed a selection of our photographs of the graffiti and written

messages that appeared in the area over the first weeks, and a timeline of the first year. The social history of the response belongs to the community, and we aimed both to share our work in progress, and to invite responses, memories and additions.

Photographs included messages of condolence from around the country and the world, like 'good people must stop bad things', or, in a child's handwriting 'I fil sad for you'. Others depicted graffiti capturing immediate responses, such as 'stay away, Mrs May' (referring to Theresa May, then Prime Minister, whose initial invisibility was not forgiven), and 'no cover up, no covering your backs'. Within ten days, a huge concrete wall under the A40 dual carriageway had become 'the wall of truth', inviting local people to speak their truth, in the context of widespread distrust of official inquiries.

Photo credits, Cathy Long.

As we reviewed Cathy's photographs, we were struck by the relevance of these early messages, even years later. The question 'when is the trial starting?', which appeared on the wall of truth ten days after the fire, remains a vital question. The Metropolitan police recently announced that **they will not be ready to press charges until late 2026**, nine and a half years after the fire and to the despair of those campaigning for justice.

The timeline depicted apparently small as well as more spectacular activities initiated by the local community, such as sorting donations, providing play activities for children, starting the monthly silent walks, creating poetry, murals and films, and holding protests. It also showed how the official response was governed, through an onslaught of public meetings, newsletters, resignations, promises, taskforces, reports, and debates.

When we initially approached our brilliant designer, Jonathan Ing, with our material, he sensibly suggested from a design point of view that we reduce the number of entries in the timeline, prompting us to be more specific about what story we wanted to tell. We knew that there was a story about waiting for a government response, and one about the staying power of the community. However, for people involved in the response, different images and events are important. The exhibition was primarily for a local audience, and so we decided to include a large number of timeline entries, hoping that people would make their own connections and tell us their own stories. They did.

People recognised their own and others' handwriting. They compared photos on their phone to our records in the timeline. They told us about the emotional impact of specific events. We created

postcards for people to take away as mementoes, one of them an iconic image of a local street sign, patched to replace the word 'Royal', so that the sign read 'The ROTTEN Borough of Kensington and Chelsea'. All week, we hoped to meet the creator behind this intervention to offer our appreciation, and finally, as we were packing up the exhibition, they dropped in, delighted to see the appreciation of their handiwork.



Photo credit, Cathy Long.

Attendees' responses

We invited people to add to the timeline, or to leave us their reflections. Some people added events, such as an additional protest that we didn't know of. Others corrected our wording or offered a different take. The entry on 18th June reading 'Leader of RBKC, Cllr Nicholas Paget-Brown releases statement expressing sorrow and willingness to learn lessons' was annotated with: "expressed sorrow and willingness to change?" That's debatable'. The final panel offered space for people to respond to the question 'What would you write on the wall?' By the end of the week, it was filled up with expressions of solidarity, unity, and frustrations. The note reading 'Why are there still no answers?' said it all.

Everything we learned about the community response and everything we presented in the exhibition came about through the creativity and generosity of local people. We hoped that representing this social history back to them would nourish further recollections and recognition. We staffed the exhibition continuously so that we could facilitate people's engagement with the materials and each other's memories.

Many people who attended said that the immediacy of the images and specific events in the timeline brought back their memories of the time in a visceral and moving way. Some appreciated the way the chronological organisation brought order to their memory of a chaotic period. For some, the emotions are still raw and difficult. They described themselves avoiding the topic of Grenfell to protect themselves and their children, and we felt that responsibility with some heaviness. Many attendees expressed gratitude that we were remembering, keeping records, and still talking about Grenfell.

Attendees repeatedly suggested we make a digital version, for wider accessibility to local historians, and this is in the pipeline. We continue to welcome additions to the timeline and archive of photographs. It is people's personal engagements that bring life and meaning to the records.

More than a record?

Our hunch that the real value of the exhibition would come through the conversations prompted by the materials rang true. Living through a disaster response takes a community on a bewildering journey from being a site of intense action, community cohesion, blame games and media scrutiny in the first few months, to the hard, often lonely, and unrecognised slog of putting one's life back together over years and even decades. Interacting with our materials, attendees reflected on their own part in the disaster response, felt recognised for it, and jointly made sense of what they lived through.



Image Credit Andreia Leitao

Collectively, Ladbroke Grove has a distinguished and **long history of struggles for social, racial and housing justice**. In recent years, a strong appetite for a local Centre of Social Justice Struggles has

emerged, envisaging a space holding living archives of local social history and education in social justice organising. Such a Centre would characterise the area not only as a site of tragedy, but one of deep-rooted and successful struggles. We see our developing archive as one strand towards that ambition, and suggest that such collective sense-making may contribute to community recovery.

The value of the material is not only local. Several people suggested we should take the exhibition on tour, to prompt reflection and action among professional and political leaders with power to effect change, and to raise awareness among a wider public. While every disaster is unique, there are repeating patterns in the responses. A local Spanish attendee, reflecting on the recent catastrophic floods in Valencia, observed that the sense of abandonment by authorities resonated precisely across these two very different settings. As a case study of the unfolding experience of a disaster response, exhibitions like ours can be excellent devices for the education of emergency responders.

We have attempted to expand on the significance of the exhibition here, but the most powerful impacts of the exhibition stem from the directness, insights and immediacy of the materials, which summed up seven and a half years of history better than we could: “why are there still no answers?”

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About the author



Flora Cornish

Flora Cornish is Professor in the Department of Methodology at LSE, where she works on the transformative potential of qualitative and participatory research methods. She has published on activism after Grenfell.



Cathy Long is Director of The Common Ground Project, a CIC that works to improve the lives of people in North Kensington, and CEO and founder of Aposto, a software company specialising in event safety. She is a community responder and researcher post-Grenfell.

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