

Demolitions, Housing, and Environmental Justice: A Toxic News Interview with a Community Activist in Hillfields, Coventry

India Foster, Project Administrator, Department of Sociology, University of Warwick, UK

Background

In 2004, Andy McGeechan led a local residents' campaign to save twelve blocks of flats from demolition in a West Midlands city in the UK. Andy was and still is a resident of the North Coventry area of Hillfields which is located next to the City Centre. Hillfields has a rich history and has changed dramatically over the years. The area was badly damaged during the [Coventry Blitz](#) of World War 2 and after suffering from decline, deprivation and riots in the [1990s](#), Hillfields has a notorious reputation throughout the city for being an area of poverty and crime. Using an online ['deprivation' calculator](#) the area approximately ranks as the 30th most deprived in the United Kingdom. However, many residents, including Andy, enjoy living there within its [rich, multicultural community](#) and would urge people look beyond the statistics.

I recently read an interview with Andy that was part of the ['Imagine Hillfields' research project](#) which, as part of its remit, looked into how despite various regeneration projects, Hillfields is still thought of locally as a poor neighbourhood with a bad reputation. The interview was about Andy's involvement at the forefront of a [community campaign](#) to save the flats, to save people's homes. Reading this created my own questions for Andy and an interest in his story and the story of the Hillfields flats. In the end the campaign only managed to save some of the tower blocks and eight were demolished, whilst the residents worried about the health impact of the resulting dust clouds. This case study highlights that environmental injustice isn't something only experienced in China or the Deep South of the USA. Environmental injustices happen everywhere. Below is an edited transcript of my recent interview with Andy.

India: How and when were the residents told that the housing organisation [Whitefriars](#) wanted to demolish the flats? What were the reasons behind their planned demolition?

Andy: Whitefriars were looking to demolish the flats because they "weren't very nice and nobody liked living them in whatsoever". So we were told that we didn't like

living in them, it turned out a lot of people did like living in them because it's close to town and a good place to live. Needless to say we lost the arguments because the demolition started and it was a foregone conclusion.

They announced it in the December tenants meeting in 2002... the whole idea was that it was an announcement for the tenants for the refurbishment of the area. So we all showed up thinking the flats needed to be painted and they did need a bit of care and attention, but that's all they needed... an independent outsider which was Birmingham City Council... said they were structurally sound and all they needed was a bit of TLC...their words you know.

...The script was we were meant to be grateful and get on the buses and go wherever we were meant to be moved, wherever there was available spaces...but we dug our

heels in... [We just wanted to stay.\[1\]](#)



So this notion of “you’re all unemployed ne’er do wells, tax dodging, Jeremy Kyle fodder”...is you know... we were real people, diverse people, old people, young people, black

people, white people, migrants. You know the first refugee crisis had started in 2001 and Coventry had signed an agreement with London to take a lot of overspill, so we had lots of Afghans, Iraqis and Iranians. The place was diverse that way as well and the place was great, we had some great, great events up Hillfields... it was a great place to live.

The place was diverse that way as well and the place was great, we had some great, great events up Hillfields... it was a great place to live.

India: Is the issue that they didn’t believe that (community spirit and great diversity etc.) was there?

Andy: Yeah, they didn't, they believed that we were an area of social deprivation, social indicators said high deprivation... So I was sitting on committees and boards throughout the 90s and now I was actually a victim of the Whitefriars board whose 'agenda' was to tidy things up and make things better for everybody, but they weren't. They were bulldozing everything, they weren't actually listening... You know their logo was '[In business for communities](#)'[2] and they weren't, they were just in business, just going in and doing this and you know the more we engaged them the better they looked.

India: During the decision making about the flats, were any of the residents consulted at all?

Andy: ... there was a [consultation](#)[3] ... PIP I think they were called... People in Places... the figures, when they came out, were something like 99% said if you do them up we will stay. And then the second question was – but if they had to go, would you move? Willingly? And only 14% said yes. So then Alison Hadden (a Director of Whitefriars), as it was, said 14% gives her a mandate to demolish.

India: So as you said before, the demolition was a foregone conclusion, what was the demolition like and what were the residents' concerns?

So they are telling the outside world, you know this stuff is being taken away to be recycled and the whole thing is pulverised and sent as landfill...

Andy: ... It hurt me a lot...to be in a place that I loved...seeing it literally torn apart. So I started photographing more as a witness of the demolitions, 'cos we were promised all these things about health and safety, environmental protection... you know the windows would be recycled ... and I took a photograph for instance, from my block into another block that had been cleared and the plastic windows, the UPVC glazing had been removed, you know the glazing had been taken out, but everything had been stock piled in the flats at the back wall in the living room where the electric fire was and the building was demolished with them in. So they are telling the outside world, you know this stuff is being taken away to be recycled and the whole thing is pulverised and sent as landfill... and then we started to think "oh my god if they're doing that then what's in this rubble? What's in this stuff?"

So we went to a public meeting... and we asked them... "what dangers is there? Is there asbestos?" and they said asbestos isn't the issue, it's the size of the particulates that's bad for your respiratory...for your lungs... and we said "well oh, oh how big are the particulates?" and they said "we don't know" ... so then the response from us was "so

you're demolishing buildings and you don't know the results of the health impact?" And they went "no".

(09.12.2003 – meeting to discuss the particulates and possible risks)

So that was horrible, I mean I walked out of that meeting... I was mulling over that these particles are air borne... and that the concrete dust could be at harmful radius' ... at harmful sizes... And



it was filtering through the estate and other blocks[4] were still occupied and people had their bedroom windows open... even the windows shut weren't properly weather sealed so dust was getting in. I could see it on the windowsills and all along the corridors and then of course Sidney Stringer School ... I've got a picture of dust reaching Sidney Stringer during the exam period and there are pupils in there... and you've got children at the play centre and the early years centre and they would have been 3, 4 and 5 and we are looking at 12 years ago...

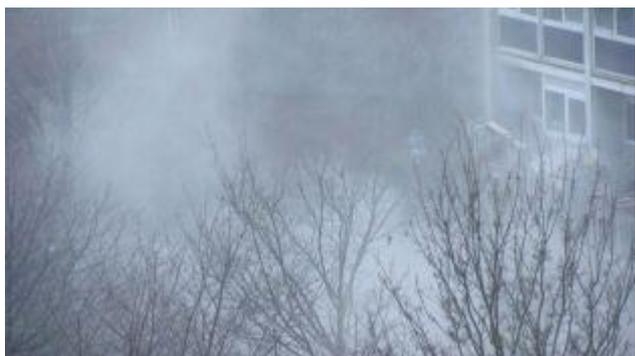
"...so you're demolishing buildings and you don't know the results of the health impact?" And they went "no".

... If we highlight this issue it may set alarm bells ringing and people might actually start joining the dots... so that's the importance of what I am telling you... is that we may not be able to trace everyone that was there at the time...even though it's probably possible ... but the issue is these health problems may be manifesting themselves further afield and further up the age chain...

...It was a period you know...not like when they do a spectacular blow up and its one weekend in July...these demolitions took place between 2002 and 2004...[maybe 2005](#)[5] I think they were still demolishing the last block...so all those blocks were demolished over a period of time, [spewing concrete dust and particle dust and glass dust everywhere... and silicate dust](#).[6]



Some of the demolitions taking place



Thick dust clouds from the demolition

India: Were any of the residents informed that the dust could be harmful in any way? Were you asked to take precautions?

Andy: No, no only at that meeting where we raised the question did they say it's not the dust it's the particulate sizes of the dust and how it is actually absorbed by your lungs or ingested by your lungs and not filtered by your lungs... people were ingesting this on a daily basis.

... There was no don't be out on this day or anything...they probably increased the spraying a little bit, you know once the alarm bells rang... (India: Is that the water?) The water, yes, when they spray the water over the dust. I noticed many times that they would spray just before an inspector arrived... that was another thing that I photographed. So the inspector would come at 11 o'clock and see that it had all been done, so they would be spraying from 10:30 onwards. So they knew he was coming, it wasn't even like it was a sort of a spot check... So there was an awful lot of short cuts taken... and its again...I mean I call it 'concrete racism', they thought "flats are horrible, the people that live in them are idiots".

India: "Concrete racism", I find that a really interesting term. Is a lot of that the presumption, as you mentioned earlier, that none of you could possibly want to live there? That you were just stuck there?

Andy: I remember one of the people who worked for Whitefriars ... said to us ... “well look anyone with anything about them has got out”, meaning that anyone who hasn’t got anything about them wits wise... all the halfwits are still there... So their, their attitude to those of us that stayed was definitely to be... you know... (Andy laughs) I can’t... words don’t describe, it defies description You know they were, they were de-humanising us...you know that’s a way of putting it... without being too emotional about it... it took years so I had to live there, wake up in the morning and hear the actual crunching.

I mean I call it ‘concrete racism’, they thought “flats are horrible, the people that live in them are idiots”.

... (When) we were told that at the announcement (about the refurbishments)... Alison Hadden said “well the flats are gonna be demolished” and there was a gap, a palpable gap. The notion was we would all have gone;

“Hooray...the buses, let’s all jump on the buses and go to happy land ‘cos we’re away from this hell hole’ and that wasn’t the response she got, she got “...er wait a minute, we live here and we like it”. And then she said “how can you like living here it’s a hellhole?” now I don’t know if she used the word hellhole but she did definitely ask [“how can you like living here?”](#)[7]

India: But later when the consultation had found that some people did like living there, did Whitefriars consider building new housing in place of the flats?

Andy: It was the press that asked, “Are you going to build new houses here?” And they said [“maybe”](#). [8] But they built bits and bobs all over the place (Coventry) instead and now the area lay derelict, once they had cleared it...

...Now this is a new story and this is important. What they did was they tried to market it and nobody would take it... then Tile Hill College merged with the Butts College ... so they needed to find a new site but they couldn’t afford the Hillfields site so Advantage West Midlands which was a QUANGO stepped in and paid the difference so then [City College bought the site](#)[9].

India: Would it have been cheaper, to have upgraded the flats? Instead of demolishing them?

Andy: ... It would. And we had this debate with them and they kept saying the government won’t give you VAT relief on refurbishments they will only give you VAT

relief on new build and to do new build you must demolish, so we were bamboozled with that argument...

Also in terms of [listing](#), we tried to get them listed but we were given the run around and told that they didn't look very good up close...but that's why you list them, so we can do them up! That was a distressing point there. But the point being that if they had been listed and kept intact... they were extremely well ventilated buildings, they were warm even in winter, in winter I would very often leave my balcony door open.

India: So were they actually well designed architecturally?

Andy: Yes, they were thought through with a design inspired by Le Corbusier... the estate itself should have been listed as it was built as a complete whole and not built all over the place.

India: What I find hard to understand is that people wanted to live there, people were happy there, it would have arguably been cheaper to do them up and even knowing all of this, still at the end of the day, why did the powers that be not appreciate the flats as the residents did and do them up, as the residents wanted? Why didn't they listen?

Andy: Prejudice, it's based on prejudice. Prejudice as we all know is blind and never based on fact. And it wasn't based on fact, they just had this notion that the people there were poor and feckless and that word was used a lot... feckless.

Closing Comments

Opinions on whether or not the eight tower blocks should have been demolished will vary greatly. Many of the statistics about deprivation and crime seem to be backed up by the many news articles that highlight these issues in the area. A quick Google of Hillfields, Coventry and you are presented with pages and pages of such articles spanning many years back. As part of my research into Andy's story I contacted a retired local GP who had worked at the Hillfields Health Centre for 26 years and visited patients in the flats before they were demolished. The GP said that his vulnerable patients had found them isolating, there were drug dealers in the corridors and overall he felt that in many ways they had become 'dens of iniquity'. He believed that from an aesthetic and psycho-social point of view, demolishing the tower blocks was positive progress for Hillfields. We spoke about his memories of the demolition themselves and if he felt there had been an increase in respiratory illness. Whilst he couldn't recall a marked immediate increase, he did mention that many residents already suffered from [COPD \(chronic obstructive pulmonary disease\)](#). I have since

discovered that although smoking is usually the main cause of COPD, dust can also be a factor. Furthermore, in smokers the effects of silica dust inhalation can be more [pronounced](#). Overall, as I discussed with Andy and have read numerous times over, proving there were any health effects due to the demolitions is very difficult; due to the time it takes for effects to take hold, issues with causality and locating residents who were there at the time.

Andy felt they were all thought of as 'feckless' and 'witless' and that people looking in on the area could only see deprivation and not community spirit.

What really strikes me about Andy's story is the way the residents of Hillfields were perceived throughout the demolitions. Andy felt they were all thought of as 'feckless' and 'witless' and that people looking in on the area could only see deprivation and not community spirit. People who didn't live there, failed to listen to how the flats and area could be improved from a residents perspective. The flats that remain and were improved upon, were in the words of our retired GP; "a great success, providing fantastic accommodation, in particular for the elderly." I have since discovered that they also offer a facility for community [meetings and clubs](#). With housing shortages constantly reported in the news in the UK, it does seem a shame that eight of these structurally sound buildings ([a total of 500 flats](#)) were demolished. The prejudice against tower blocks that Andy spoke of during the interview and 'concrete racism' is arguably very rife right now, with PM David Cameron's plan to 'blitz' poverty by [demolishing council estates](#) and their high rise buildings. Various commentators are concerned that this '[estate narrative stigmatises those living in social housing](#)' and upholds the belief that issues like '[mental-health, drug use and family difficulties are causes of poverty](#)' and not the results of poverty.

In conclusion, whilst we may remain unsure as to whether or not the Hillfields flats should have been demolished and whether or not the health effects of their demolition can ever be tracked; we can be sure that throughout the process, many of the residents did not feel listed to. It seems the decisions were already made and the plans were a foregone conclusion. The whole experience, was for Andy and many of his friends and neighbours, de-humanising, unjust and unfair. Many people all over the world have had similar experiences when it comes to 'redevelopment' and 'regeneration'.

(Featured images: credit [Andy McGeechan](#))

[1] This news article includes quotes from residents who wanted to stay and those who were happier to leave. One resident remarks how they had been promised their flat

would be 'done up' but that it never was and she felt this was because the plans to demolish had been known for a long time.

[2] The phrase used was 'iN business for neighbourhoods' and this is a National Housing Federation logo, given to housing associations that have 'made a set of promises – to customers, neighbourhoods and excellence.' On the 'Our Promises' webpage it states that housing associations that are 'iN business for neighbourhoods' promise that for their customers they will '[make them our driving force; listen, respond and engage them in our work; offer them respect, choice and support.](#)'

[3] This article refers to a consultation where out of 266 respondents, 184 wanted to remain in Hillfields, either in the flats or other accommodation, so this is 69%. There is no reference here to doing the flats up with the option to stay, but if this was given as an option then it is arguable that the % of people wanting to stay (as Andy mentions above) could be higher.

[4] The authors of this medical journal article conclude that 'individuals living near sites of public housing demolition are at risk for exposure to high particulate concentrations.' Considering that the Hillfields demolitions took place over a number of years, it is arguable that the residents may have been affected in the short and/or long term.

[5] The linked news article is dated March 2006 and entitled 'Final block of high-rise flats to be demolished'.

[6] The Silica-Safe website explains that silica is in 'many common construction materials... for example, asphalt, brick, cement, concrete, drywall, grout, mortar, stone, sand, and tile' and also highlights the three types of silicosis; *Chronic silicosis*, which usually occurs after 10 or more years of exposure to crystalline silica at relatively low concentrations; *Accelerated silicosis*, which results from exposure to high concentrations of crystalline silica and develops 5 to 10 years after the initial exposure; and *Acute silicosis*, which occurs where exposure concentrations are the highest and can cause symptoms to develop within a few weeks to 4 or 5 years after the initial exposure.

[7] This article quotes Alison Hadden as saying "My overriding memory is of driving round the ring road, looking at those flats and thinking: 'They're horrible.'"

[8] The news article cited here states that the original plan was to build new housing.

[9] In this March 2004 news article, local Councillor Dave Nellist argues that the land should be used to provide housing and not the college he believed would be developed there, so the plans for college development were known to some as early as 2004. The article also mentions some suspicions that the area was earmarked for the college and for Coventry University student accommodation. Since 2004 there has been an ongoing increase in the [development of student flats](#) in the area.