



Webb at the Ronan Point tower block in east London, 1986

OBITUARY

Sam Webb obituary

Architect and safety campaigner who for decades warned of the risks of a catastrophic fire in a council tower block but was ignored

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Sam Webb was vilified, ridiculed and most importantly ignored in 50 years of campaigning to persuade governments to make council tower blocks safer. Talking to the *Today* programme on the morning after the Grenfell fire in North Kensington, west London, in June 2017, the architect almost broke down as he described the blaze that claimed the lives of 72 people as a “disaster waiting to happen”.

Decades before the worst peacetime fire in a block of flats, Webb had been warning against flammable cladding materials (such as the ACM cassette rainscreen panels used at Grenfell) that could cause fire to spread rapidly. He argued that the material behind the surface cladding should be fireproof by law

(under the existing building regulations only surface cladding needed to be fireproof).

As the best-known campaigner for making the thousands of council tower blocks built in the Sixties safer, the former local authority architect spent much of his spare time as an unpaid, self-appointed safety investigator and consequently knew more about them than anyone else, even the local authority officers responsible for them.

This journey began after the Ronan Point disaster on May 16, 1968. Ivy Hodge, a council tenant in the newly built 22-storey tower block in Newham, east London, leant over her gas cooker and lit a match. The explosion, thought to have been caused by an electrical fault which was made worse by the large pile of highly flammable gramophone records in her living room, blew out the pre-cast concrete panels that formed the walls of her flat and one corner of the building progressively collapsed like a house of cards. Four people were killed; miraculously Hodge survived.

At the time Webb was working at Camden council and recalled all the original drawings of the borough's tower blocks built with large concrete panels being investigated and one found to be at risk of a similar collapse. He was appalled when a senior figure at the council later publicly declared all the borough's buildings were safe. Webb went on television to contradict this account and the block was soon evacuated. Making the first of many enemies did not stop him from causing further trouble. No less determined for his gentle manner and soft voice, Webb noted wryly that a representative of the construction company Taylor Woodrow Anglian, which had built Ronan Point, said after the disaster that he could "see no sign of structural damage". Webb claimed that the government report into the Ronan Point collapse some months later was "watered down" by officials and issued on the day when the news headlines were dominated by Richard Nixon's victory in the US election.

Webb's own investigations at Ronan Point found that the steel bolts between the large concrete panels were insufficiently tightened. One bolt within the structure was found to have been wrapped in a copy of the Daily Mirror rather than filled with concrete as it should have been. The panels, which were supposed to rest on a bed of mortar, were instead resting on structural levelling bolts. The weakened, exposed bolts, which had become corroded by rainwater, caused the concrete panels to crack. His findings eventually led to the demolition of the nine tower blocks at the Freemasons Estate in Newham, including Ronan Point, in 1986. Webb gave a lecture at the Royal Institute of British Architects (RIBA) in 1988 in which he argued that the UK epidemic of poorly built and dangerous high-rise council blocks started after Britain set increasingly ambitious housebuilding targets during the baby boom. Under the 1956 Housing Subsidies Act local authorities were paid more money for every storey they built over five floors. System-built housing — in which large, prefabricated reinforced concrete panels were craned into place and bolted together — came into vogue as the most affordable way of achieving high volumes and made a big contribution to the building of a record 470,000 dwellings in Britain in 1967, the year before the Ronan Point collapse. After that high-rise council building began to decline. Some called it the death of the modern movement, which had dominated building design after the war.

The more Webb looked into it, the more he realised that system-built housing, and in particular large panel systems (LPS), had been built across the UK with shoddy materials and poor workmanship. Building regulations were ignored and unskilled labourers were paid on a piece-rate, with bonuses for speedy construction. In some cases the panels were not bolted at all and in later years there were cases when large concrete panels simply came away and crashed to the ground. Local authority site supervision was minimal during construction. The government set up a watchdog but it effectively had no power to act. It became clear to Webb that some builders were bribing

local authority officials in order to continue winning contracts for poorly built tower blocks.



Webb in 2021 after being appointed MBE

In 1968 Webb teamed up with the journalist Paul Foot of *Private Eye* to investigate local authority corruption in high-rise tower blocks. Their work eventually exposed the northeast architect and property developer John Poulson, who was involved in building LPS schemes with his company Open Systems Building. Six years later Poulson was found guilty of bribing local authority officials to win building contracts and jailed for five years, later increased to seven. The home secretary in Edward Heath's government, Reginald Maudling, who had been a director of Open Systems Building, was forced to resign in 1972 as a result of the investigation.

Webb also worked with Joan Littlewood's Theatre Workshop on a critically acclaimed play inspired by the Ronan Point disaster about poorly built houses in 17th-century Restoration London.

With building regulations still woefully inadequate, Webb founded the National Tower Blocks Network in the early 1980s to advise tenants — of which there were an estimated six million living in defective high-rise dwellings — on how to make their buildings safer. Many of the original builders of flats with large panel systems were litigated against and settled out of court.

Hundreds of millions of pounds would be spent on remedial works aimed at making tower blocks safer, such as rainscreen cladding to prevent water leakage that could weaken the structure. Often, such works created even greater risks because of insufficiently tested flammable cladding.

Webb would go on to survey residential tower blocks across the country and asserted that more than half of them did not meet basic fire safety standards. “We were simply told nothing could be done because it would make too many people homeless,” Webb recalled. After Grenfell, tens of thousands of leaseholders would be told that their flats were unsaleable because of safety fears.

In 1990 Webb wrote a report for the Home Office that warned of a fire of “King's Cross” proportions in a tower block unless building regulations were made much more rigorous. He issued a similar warning after investigating a fire at the 14-storey Lakanal House in Camberwell, southeast London, in July 2009, which killed six people, including two children and a baby. Once again he produced an independent report identifying flammable cladding panels as responsible for the rapid spread of the blaze, after a faulty television on the ninth floor had started the fire. In more recent years, and especially after the Grenfell fire, Webb was taken more seriously and elected both a

member of the Riba Council and the institute's committee investigating Grenfell. He gave evidence to the public inquiry into the fire. He also served as the building safety adviser on the all-parliamentary fire and rescue group.

With tower block residents around the country faced with huge bills for the retrofitting of their properties after Grenfell, Webb was involved in the launch of FixMyBlock.org to provide practical resources and inform them of their rights on fire, structural safety and disrepair. To the end of his life he was never happier than when sitting around a leaseholder or tenant's kitchen table sketching joints and panels, explaining the structure of their building and warning of dangers.

Sam Webb was born in Finchley, north London, in 1937 to Samuel Webb, a licensed victualler, and Marie (née Watkins), a dressmaker. He attended Christ's College in Finchley and went on to study architecture at the Northern Polytechnic (now London Metropolitan University) graduating in 1962 having taken two years out to do his National Service in the RAF.

He then worked as a municipal architect for the London borough of Camden and in Somerset, before moving to Kent in 1975. For the next 21 years he was a lecturer in construction and design at the Canterbury College of Art and School of Architecture, often enlisting his students to help in his tower block investigations.

Webb stepped up his campaigning in 1983 after attending a national tower blocks conference and speaking to tenants in the rebuilt and reoccupied Ronan Point. They told him how unsafe they felt; one said that they could smell food being cooked 20 floors beneath them. Webb investigated many of their flats and found gaps between the walls and floors. He took a sabbatical from teaching to undertake a full survey of the block. His findings prompted the local authority to evacuate the block for a second time, this time permanently.

In 1961, he married Sylvia Bartlett, whom he met while studying. After their divorce he married his second wife, Sheila Crichton. They divorced in 2008. He is survived by his daughters Rachel, Hannah, and Sarah.

After decades of campaigning Webb was appointed MBE in 2021. His citation read: “Never afraid to ask difficult questions of those in authority, he made a unique and expert contribution . . . and has probably saved many lives in so doing.”

Sam Webb MBE, architect, was born on August 5, 1937. He died of undisclosed causes on September 24, 2022, aged 85