



How Urban Building Inspections Can Impede - Or Encourage - The Expansion of Safe and Affordable Housing

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Building inspections in U.S. cities originated to ensure housing stock met safety requirements. But established inspection systems are not always successful, as revealed by recent building fires at the Ghost Ship in Oakland, California, and the Grenfell Tower in London, England. News coverage and public outrage following terrible losses of life in those fires highlight the critical significance of city inspections and responses to complaints about the safety of commercial and residential buildings. Those tragedies also shed new light on the precariousness of affordable housing and uneven government attention to housing availability and safety in areas of different wealth. My research speaks to how issues of housing safety and affordability connect to one another.

Building Departments Need More Resources

Media coverage of the fires in Oakland and London has repeatedly pointed out that these buildings were not inspected even when residents lodged complaints. In Oakland, city records show that inspectors did respond to complaints about debris and rodents in the yard and in a neighboring vacant lot – and these issues were addressed. An additional complaint, lodged two weeks before the fire, should have directed inspectors' attention to the interior of the building, but it was still pending at the time of the fire.

This is not surprising. Building departments often struggle to keep up with complaints and cities are frequently months behind on following up on calls from the public. The inspection process is different in London, but many argue that austerity cuts contributed to the lack of oversight from authorities who could have prevented dangerous materials from being used in Grenfell Tower. Cities vary, but gaps often occur between complaints about building conditions and ensuing city inspections. Virtually everywhere, municipal building departments need more resources to protect residents.

Adding to the Precarious Nature of Affordable Housing

The tragedies in both cities have also brought new urgency to discussions about the shortfalls of affordable housing in good condition. Various groups of city residents are unequally affected. The residents who have the most to lose or who may not get quick responses to complaints filed with cities are those already in precarious circumstances – including tenants who fear evictions, undocumented immigrants, populations still disadvantaged by legacies of housing discrimination, and people who need economic assistance to afford housing.

For many, dangerous buildings are the only housing they can afford. Some municipalities, like Los Angeles and Boston, have introduced proactive rental inspections – meaning that property owners can only rent if their

properties undergo periodic inspections. Proponents of these rules insist that landlords pay fees – just under \$45 per unit per year in Los Angeles – to cover some of the costs incurred by building departments. But what happens then: who actually ends up bearing the brunt of inspection costs? Officially, a property owner in Los Angeles can charge a tenant one-twelfth of the fee; landlords are still able to raise rents to cover the rest of the fee along with the costs of making repairs necessary to pass an inspection.

Indeed, sometimes raising rent is the only option for landlords. Even in rent-controlled cities like Los Angeles, landlords can gradually increase rents over time, or use repair work as an excuse to re-lease apartments and charge higher rents to new tenants. As a result, middle-class as well as lower-income Americans find that housing is increasingly less affordable. Legally required inspections alone cannot solve the availability and cost problems. Simply eliminating inspections is obviously not the solution. But the bottom line is that increasing inspections without taking other steps to increase the supply of safe housing is likely to diminish already depleted stocks of affordable housing.

Bridging Tensions between Inspection and Affordability

Reformers looking for ways to link effective programs of building inspection with the encouragement of sufficient affordable housing can advocate a series of interrelated measures:

- Pay careful attention to the relationship between building inspections and affordable housing, noting that increasing inspections might strain resources in affordable housing.
- When inspections note the need for repairs, provide subsidies for necessary work.
- Increase government ownership and management of affordable and other, inexpensive housing.
- As supplies of inexpensive housing improve, recognize needs and possibilities for more inspections and successful follow-up steps.

A benign circle of self-reinforcing reforms is possible. If additional affordable housing becomes available, tenants may be more willing to call inspectors to address problems in their buildings, enabling the inspectors to do more to ensure safe housing. But if inspections increase without safeguarding the supply of affordable housing, then the costs of fees and repairs will discourage owners and tenants alike, diminishing over time the stock of safe, affordable housing.

Although extreme examples, the recent fatal building fires in Oakland and London highlight possible tensions between supplies of affordable housing and effective safety inspections. Urban housing policies cannot tackle only one side of this dilemma while ignoring the other. Cities need to encourage construction or renovations that create more affordable housing units while at the same time ensuring that all units, regardless of residents' incomes and social status, are regularly inspected – and, when safety problems are discovered, repaired in ways that owners and tenants can afford. Regulations that mandate economically impossible repairs will only serve to push the poor and marginalized into still more unsafe, under-inspected spaces.

Read more in Robin Bartram, "[Housing and Social and Material Vulnerabilities](#)," *Housing, Theory and Society* 33, no. 4 (2016):469-483.

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