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MAY 2013

## Residents forced from homes **INSIDE...**

### Council claims block poses 'intolerable' fire safety risk

BY ZOE JEWELL, EDITOR

Residents of 16 flats in a long-term housing co-operative in central Brixton are to be forced from their homes following a surprise fire inspection.

Members of the Carlton Mansions Housing Co-operative (CMHC), founded in 1979, have been told to leave the 122-year-old building immediately, after a fire report advised the building was unsafe. The council demanded "residents vacate the building as a priority."

But residents have hit back at the council saying the fire risk assessment states it "is subjective and for guidance only." They say they were told on the phone prior to the visit that it "would be advisory only."

Shocked cooperative members met with The Bugle last week. One member who has lived in Carlton Mansions for 29 years said: "How can anyone decamp so quickly when they're a long-term resident? You've got everything registered at that address, you're in London so storage space is at a premium. How is it actually practically possible?" Another member spoke of the severe emotional stress caused by the council's actions and has now been referred to the Mental Health Team as a result.

A spokesperson from Lambeth Housing department said: "the council is obliged to ensure its buildings meet relevant health

and safety regulations regardless of their age. The council has a duty of care to residents and we cannot ignore such a clear recommendation from a fire risk assessment."

Ward councillor Rachel Heywood said: "I have to be clear that we cannot allow anybody to continue to live in a building...that has been judged to be 'intolerable' in terms of fire risk. So soon after the inquest into Lakanal House...we are only too aware of the responsibility of local authorities to ensure the safety of citizens to the greatest possible degree."

"We are doing everything we can to support them. This includes the possibility of temporarily rehousing everybody into a single building", she said. CMHC had not been informed of this possibility when asked by The Bugle.

The fire risk assessment identifies lack of 'compartmentalisation' - to stop a fire spreading from flat to flat - as one problem in the mansion blocks.

The Co-operative has offered to do all it can to fulfil safety standards but the council states this will not be enough. CMHC also pointed out that the floors are solid timber and that the walls between the flats are thick brick. The building has never been damaged by fire. CMHC is now seeking independent advice.

The Co-op started life 32 years ago on a temporary agreement with the council as short life housing. A member said: "This was an experi-



**FIRE RISK:** Residents have been ordered to leave immediately. Inset, ward councillor Rachel Heywood called the fire risk 'intolerable' ment in using what would be considered small amounts of money to make a place habitable, rather than totally refurbishing a place."

"It was done on the self-help basis which means that the people who were going to live there did most of the work themselves." At one stage, the Co-operative gave the council 50% of allocation to people on the housing list.

The short life arrangements

have allowed for historic buildings in Brixton to be maintained. One member said: "When we put our heating on it keeps the buildings warm... We've kept the heritage and then they can sell it off."

The Co-operative was also responsible for the painting of the Nuclear Dawn mural, now a celebrated Brixton landmark.

More recently, the residents and

*Continued on p6*



### Baking for Brixton

A bake-off is one of dozens of off-beat events covered in our double page listings pullout, we've sorted your entertainment for May

*What's On p10-11*



### Great adventure

Luke Massey looks at the history of London's oldest adventure playground, Triangle, as spring approaches.

*Features, p7*



### Market proposal

Resident and neighbour of Market Row, Richard Pope, gives his three point plan for the future of Brixton's covered markets.

*Analysis, p7*



Picture: Nick Weedon

## Mural project climax

The finishing touches are being put on an inspirational community mural in the shadow of Brixton Windmill.

Work began on the artwork on April 10, with artist and designer Camila Cardenosa working with local residents, friends and inmates from Brixton Prison.

Locals are invited to lend a hand painting on April 27 and 28, before the final unveiling of the mural at Windmill Gardens on May 6.

The party will include music and activities suitable for all the family. Brixton Windmill will be open for free guided tours.

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HERNE HILL  
FREE FILM  
FESTIVAL

History will be made at Brockwell Park this month with the first ever full-length outdoor screening of a film in its grounds. The free screening of *Spirited Away* by Studio Ghibli on Saturday 18 May takes its place in an exciting line-up of films put on by the inaugural Herne Hill Free Film Festival.

The festival follows the success of last year's celebrations marking the 150th anniversary of Herne Hill Railway Station, when Buster Keaton's silent movie, *The General*, was displayed in Station Square. Internationally acclaimed silent movie pianist Neil Brand accompanied on the piano that sits within the station.

Organisers were overwhelmed by the popularity of the event, with over 700 residents turning up, more than three times the numbers expected.

This year's festival, supported by Film London, kicked off on 19 April with a Keaton and Charlie Chaplin double bill. Other notable screenings include *Muriel's Wedding*, put on at Brockwell Lido on 4 May, and a return to Station Square on 1 June with *Ang Lee's Eat, Drink, Man, Woman*, preceded by a street food festival.

Organiser Charlotte Ashworth told *The Bugle*: "we had a brilliant time bringing the local community together last year. Our festival is open to anyone who wants to see great films in our favourite local places. And best of all, it's completely free!"

The full programme of events can be found on the website [www.hernehillforum.org.uk](http://www.hernehillforum.org.uk)

## Expressing Africa

Arts Editor Ruth Waters caught up with leading Afro-surreal expressionist painter, Adjani Okpu-Egbe, between his Coldharbour Lane studio and his Atlantic Road exhibition.

Growing up in Cameroon, Adjani dreamed of playing for the national football team. He was selected for the junior national team at fourteen but his businessman father was determined he would study mathematics and follow him into business. Locked in his bedroom for hours on end supposedly doing sums, Adjani began drawing footballers from memory, hurriedly scrawling mathematical sums over the top when his father came to check on him.

The combination of mathematical symbols and expressive drawings remains a defining feature of Adjani's work. His paintings are a complex lattice of modern and ancient mathematical and linguistic symbols, alongside bold and abstracted figures in raw colours. "It's unbelievable the way certain things have worked together in my life, leading me to paint in this way."

At high school it wasn't just his drawing skills that got him noticed. An enthusiastic sportsman and a highly commended team player, Adjani thought of being a politician and studied archaeology and history at university. Worried how he would earn a living in Cameroon, Adjani then decided to enroll in the British Army and served for five years, before being discharged due to health problems last year.

It was only while he was on sick leave from the army that Adjani returned to the drawing and painting from his childhood. "Most of the time that I was drawing, I noticed that I was at peace. I stopped taking my prescribed antidepressants - they didn't work for me - and I used my art as therapy. I did a couple of drawings which many people seemed to really like, and I just took it from there."

"In the beginning, I wasn't expecting to be showing my work

to anybody. The reason for drawing and painting today is still the same as it was then: therapy. To start with I refused to sell or give any of my pieces away because they were so personal."

Having only been a dedicated artist since September 2012, Adjani has packed a lot in already, exhibiting in London, LA and New York. Last summer, Adjani was selected by the BBC to be one of 20 artists commissioned to capture the Queen's Diamond Jubilee river pageant from the Millennium Bridge, and he has recently returned from presenting a print of the final pageant-inspired piece to be hung in the British Embassy in Cameroon. He is also the first person to be given permission to exhibit at the Dalton Barracks in Abingdon, Oxfordshire.

He tells me about his surreal journey from leaving Cameroon to returning there as an honorary artist: "When I was in Cameroon earlier this year, I was standing as an invited guest, expenses paid, in the exact same spot as I stood almost seven years ago, applying for a visa to live in the UK."

Adjani had his first solo exhibition last year at Mokspace Gallery opposite the British Museum, and will be returning there later this year, after he exhibits in South Kensington and, of course, Brixton's Knight Webb Gallery. Where does he find inspiration for this constant outpouring of creativity? "I'm really interested in ancient African and Western myths and symbols," he tells me, "and I read a lot, and try to research everything that interests me." But it is his interest in contemporary life, interlaced with the mystical, ancient and symbolic, which gives his work universal appeal. "I can just jump on the bus for whole days at a time. I love watching people, and come back with a whole sketch pad full of ideas and drawings."

Inspired by two greats of expressionism, Jean-Michel Basquiat and Pablo Picasso, Adjani's work has



EXPRESSIVE: Adjani Okpu-Egbe painting at Knight Webb Gallery. Mario Balotelli's *Revery* (below left) and *Ekpe 1*, below right

a unique blend of influences and guiding principles. "I stand in a more privileged position than either of them. Although Basquiat had an African heritage, he never actually lived in Africa, and Picasso was only an interested outsider; I lived and studied there, so expressing Africa comes naturally to me and I get to tap into their mastery of expressionism with my own ideas and images."

Much like his career path, Adjani and his Brixton studio were united by a remarkable series of events. While in the area working with a group of young people on graffiti art, he went into the 'D' Convenience Store on Coldharbour Lane to find the man serving him to be not only from Cameroon, but from the very same village as him. The two instantly bonded, and Adjani now paints from a makeshift studio at the back of the shop.

Adjani is regularly invited to paint live at events, with the Diamond Jubilee pageant being the most notable event he has painted at. He also painted at the Jarvits Center New York last year. Why does he think he is constantly invited to paint live? "People are fascinated by the creation of art. I love to remove all the barriers of painting. I get passers-by participating, and give them the brush. It's fantastic."

However, one of these events landed Adjani in the cells. Whilst out painting around Clapham Junction during the August 2011 riots he was mistakenly arrested and

accused of looting a t-shirt. Never easily defeated, Adjani views this personal injustice and the riots as a whole through an artist's eyes. "In my mind, the riots were expressionism but performed on the wrong platform. These youngsters have something to say, but they're saying it in the wrong way."

Not satisfied with the soaring success of his paintings, which sell for thousands of pounds and attract large audiences to both and solo shows, Adjani tells me "I will consider myself doing well when I can show young people to express themselves through art and use it as therapy."

Adjani's work is currently part of *Urban Expressionism and a Stray Talent* at Knight Webb Gallery on Atlantic Road.

