

NEWS

Bronx building collapse sparks worries about NYC's aging housing stock



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A partial building collapse in the Morris Heights section of the Bronx earlier this week is raising concerns about the state of New York City's aging housing stock — and the tools and penalties intended to prevent future disasters.

Lawmakers, buildings experts and everyday New Yorkers say they worry about the future of older structures and are calling on the city to staff up the Department of Buildings while increasing penalties on owners who fail to comply with required repairs or inspections.

“There are thousands of these very old, compromised buildings, and we have some indicators of where they might be, and we don’t know exactly what the conditions are,” said Councilmember Pierina Sanchez of the Bronx, who chairs the City Council's housing and buildings committee. “I am concerned about how we’re doing in the city in terms of protecting the most vulnerable tenants in the worst housing.”

There were no fatalities or any serious injuries reported at the collapsed building at 1915 Billingsley Terrace, but the disaster left 153 people across 44 apartments homeless, according to the Red Cross. The DOB, fire department and Bronx district attorney are all investigating exactly what caused a corner of the seven-story, nearly century-old structure to crumble onto the sidewalk.

Such catastrophes are relatively rare in New York City, but Monday's destruction came as the city's buildings department faces a serious staff shortage and more cuts on the horizon, despite its crucial role overseeing more than a million buildings citywide.

The agency did not respond to questions about its capacity, but on Tuesday, Deputy Mayor for Operations Meera Joshi acknowledged the DOB's gargantuan task.

“We're a city of millions of buildings and 500-something inspectors,” Joshi said. “So we will never, with boots on the ground, get to every building.”

She said officials are “looking to sharpen” penalties for building owners who fail to comply with mandated inspections or blow off repairs and other work they're required to complete. The city doesn't have the power to issue liens and take over buildings from negligent owners, leaving fines as the best available tool, Joshi said.

Mayor Eric Adams cautioned that building collapses are bound to occasionally happen in a city where the median building age was about 90 years in 2017. The Bronx apartment complex was built in 1927, according to property records.

“Every collapse is a bad collapse, but many of our buildings come from an older stock, and so you have this from time to time,” Adams said.

So just how likely are these kinds of collapses?

That partly depends on the results of the current investigation, said Michael De Chiara, a prominent construction lawyer. He said forensic engineers will determine whether problems that caused the collapse could be repeated in other buildings with the same design, construction methods or age.

“You look at New York City’s existing building stock and how many buildings like this are there?” De Chiara said. “Is this one of 50? Or a one-off?”

Images of the Bronx building before the collapse show cracks along a first-floor column on the corner that crumbled. An engineer hired by the landlord determined the building had “unsafe” façade problems in 2020, stemming from issues inspectors first identified a decade earlier.

Landlord David Kleiner spoke briefly with Gothamist on Tuesday and said he did not know what caused the collapse. The engineer, Richard Koenigsberg, told Gothamist he thought a structural problem, not a crumbling facade, caused an entire corner to crumble, exposing the apartments within.

Scott Kamen, an architect specializing in historic preservation, said the city is doing a good job enforcing safety laws, including regular façade inspections on buildings taller than six stories. Engineers are also able to use better technology, such as drones, to inspect buildings more thoroughly.

“In many ways, New York City has the greatest architecture in the world but we also have the oldest stock of buildings in the country,” he said. “So we’re just grappling with an immense problem as the city ages, but we are getting it under control.”

But he said problems arise when landlords choose not to comply with safety requirements, even when they face penalties.

“The failure to maintain a building has been a rampant issue in a town where you might have 30,000 of these buildings,” Kamen said. “It’s been very difficult to track these buildings, and even if the owner does bring a person with qualifications, they don’t always follow through with the recommendations.”

“A lot of buildings are flying under the radar,” he added.

Plenty of landlords rack up housing code violations that make life difficult for tenants or do the bare minimum to prevent façades from crumbling to the sidewalk, especially since the necessary work can be expensive. But buildings very rarely crumble.

Those problems usually have nothing to do with the structural integrity of a building, said Jay Martin, the head of the Community Housing Improvement Program, a landlord trade group.

“This is going to consistently be a concern: maintenance, repair and taking good care of buildings, given their age and need to invest significant funds into them,” he said, adding that the city should ramp up its emergency repair program and subsidize costly structural work with other costs, including insurance, on the rise.

Tenants made homeless after the Billingsley Terrace collapse are wondering if the landlord’s failure to make repairs and maintain safe living conditions hints at deeper problems that were left to fester.

Angel Soto said he and his mother are still reeling from the collapse and are staying at a Bronx hotel. He said a DOB official told them they would probably be able to return to their home briefly to pick up clothes and other possessions.

“They say they’re going to reinforce it so we can go in and get some things,” said Soto, who lived in a third-floor apartment in the building for 12 years. “We don’t want to go back there though. It’s scary.”

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