

Historic Toronto theatre collapse kills one

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Midway through demolition the former Uptown Theatre in downtown Toronto partially collapsed onto an adjacent building Monday, killing one man and trapping several others beneath the rubble.

At least 14 people, including three children, were injured when one wall of the structure gave way onto a two-storey building housing a school for teaching English as a second language to mostly immigrant adults. Mejia Solis, a 27-year-old accountant from Costa Rica studying in Toronto, suffered what appears to be a quick death when the roof of the building fell in. A 10 year-old boy was trapped beneath him.

There were reported to be about 30 or 40 students at the Yorkville English Academy at the time of the collapse just after 10:30 in the morning and a number of the victims, including a young boy who had suffered what were described as “crushing wounds,” were taken to hospital. Five people who had been trapped in the collapse were quickly rescued when emergency services and police arrived on the scene; none of them suffered life-threatening injury.

Mr. Solis, the only fatality in the collapse, was a university graduate and had been in Toronto for seven months and was looking forward to returning home. He was apparently writing a letter to his family and there is speculation that he may have saved the life of the boy next to him by shielding him when the roof caved in on them. His funeral will likely be held next week, but reportedly over 200 of his friends and family paid their respects at his home in Costa Rica yesterday.

No clear cause of the cave-in has yet been established, but questions have been raised over how such a painstaking and dangerous operation could have been carried out immediately next to an occupied building. The theatre building had already been partly demolished and crews were apparently in the process of pulling down one section of the roof when a supporting wall gave way, falling on the adjacent building below.

Priestly Demolition, one of the largest companies of its kind in the province, began demolition just over two weeks ago and while a number of complaints have since been filed by local residents over noise and dust none had been filed over the safety of the project.

There are, however, reports from a number of sources that concerns were raised in the days and hours before the collapse over the safety of the work site, but it appears that these were not heeded. New owner Marco Muzzo had himself visited the site over the weekend and called the demolition company to express his concern about the condition of the site Monday morning. A number of other witnesses also said they had been troubled by what appeared to be hazardous conditions. City building inspectors had not visited the site since construction began, but this is described as standard practice by Ann Borooah, chief building official for the city.

Although human error in the dismantling of the structure has been raised early as an explanation, insufficient safeguards at government level may have played a part. There is a suggestion that cutbacks in government safety inspection staff may have allowed for inadequate monitoring of the site. The previous provincial Tory government cut the number of workplace safety inspectors by over 25 percent in the course of its eight-year rule as part of what is now recognized as a reckless policy of government cost-cutting. While the current Liberal government has said it will hire at least 25 new inspectors in the new year, staffing levels will still be well below those of eight years ago.

Newly installed mayor David Miller said he would await the outcome of investigations that will be carried out in the coming weeks by both the police and the Ministry of Labour. These will likely lead to a coroner’s inquest to determine the cause of the one fatality.

The demolition of one of Toronto's oldest and most appealing theatres came about as a result of the previous owners' refusal to bring the building into conformity with an order from the Ontario Human Rights Commission to make it wheelchair accessible. Famous Players sold the building last May to developer Paggia Ltd. for \$7.5 million and the company intends to build a 50-storey, 362-condominium structure on the site, a plan which is still under review.



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