

New York construction workers killed and injured in another high-rise accident

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For the second time in two and a half months a crane collapsed in New York City Friday morning, killing two construction workers and seriously injuring another, forcing the evacuation of nearby residential buildings and throwing an entire neighborhood into chaos.

The site of the accident this time was Yorkville, on Manhattan's Upper East Side, once known as one of the island's few remaining affordable neighborhoods. The construction of luxury apartment towers is steadily transforming it into another preserve of the wealthy.

A crane being used to construct a 32-floor condominium tower at the corner of 91st Street and First Avenue spun around twice, turned and then toppled, its cab smashing into an adjacent building and then falling 12 stories, destroying balconies and opening a gash in the side of the neighboring structure.

Workers on the ground watched helplessly as the crane's operator, Donald Leo, 30, of Staten Island, fell to his death. Ramadan Kurtas, 27, died as a result of his injuries. A third worker, Simeon Alexis, was taken to the hospital with a severe wound to his chest. Those who survived the collapse were "shook up and crying," construction foreman Scott Bair told the Associated Press. "These are some hardened men, but they were crying."

While reporters on the scene tried to ask some neighborhood residents whether they thought the loud booming noise made when the crane fell was a terrorist attack, virtually all of them said they knew instantly that it was the crane toppling. Major construction accidents have become an ever more common occurrence over the recent period in the city, and many in the area had watched the crane go up with serious trepidation.

According to the city's Buildings Department,

neighbors had called in at least 23 complaints about the construction site, over violations ranging from falling bricks and wood to use of the extended crane over the sidewalk with no barriers to protect pedestrians walking underneath.

The fatal accident came just one day after the city had lifted a stop-work order over numerous violations at the site. One of the contractors working on the site had been cited last month for using the crane in an unsafe manner.

The accident underscored the price in blood being paid for New York City's building boom, which is being driven largely by the influx of wealth from across the country and around the world.

It comes just six weeks after another crane broke apart and fell just two miles south on 51st Street, killing six workers as well as a Florida woman who was visiting the city for St. Patrick's Day.

In the wake of that collapse, as well as a seemingly endless stream of other accidents involving workers falling from scaffoldings and other disasters causing deaths and injuries, the administration of billionaire Republican Mayor Michael Bloomberg carried out a shakeup.

Buildings Commissioner Patricia Lancaster resigned last month, after revelations of the mishandling of permits and inspections. The department then shut down eight of 29 tower cranes being used in construction projects and ordered that inspectors be present whenever cranes were either installed or extended. That order was rescinded just last week, in favor of spot checks.

Earlier this month, the city announced that it is hiring 63 more safety inspectors—a 15 percent increase in staffing that will still leave the inspection process woefully behind the pace of construction.

Speaking to a press conference at the disaster site, Bloomberg cautioned against seeing a “pattern” in the back-to-back crane collapses, stressing that they were different kinds of cranes. He also suggested that the death and injury of workers was an inevitable cost of doing business.

“Keep in mind that construction is a dangerous business, and you will always have fatalities,” the mayor said. “Sadly, two crane collapses in a short period of time makes you think there’s a pattern, but there is no reason to think that there is any connection.”

Manhattan has been the epicenter of New York City’s record high-rise construction boom, which has continued, until recently, despite the drastic contraction in construction brought on nationwide by the subprime mortgage crisis and the plummeting of home values.

Figures show a 12 percent increase in high-rise construction last year, which has gone hand-in-hand with construction accidents soaring by 83 percent.

At least 14 workers have been killed thus far this year in the city—two more than the number recorded for all of 2007.

According to national statistics, construction remains the second most dangerous occupation, after transportation, with four construction workers dying on average every day.

The building under construction, to be known as the Azure, was a luxury condominium in which apartments were to be sold for up to \$4.7 million. It was being built on the site of a former public school, under a deal worked out between the city’s Department of Education and developers, which ceded the air rights for the construction of the luxury apartments in return for the building of a new school at the structure’s base.

While the most recent figures show that the nationwide construction slump is beginning to catch up with New York—last month registered a 51 percent drop in building permits compared to the same period a year ago—such luxury high rises continue to account for a disproportionate share of new construction.

While building goes on for those who can afford to spend millions on apartments, the housing crisis for the vast majority of New York’s population, which is made up of the working class and poor, becomes ever more threatening.

Just the day before the Upper East Side construction disaster, the chairman of the city’s Housing Authority

announced plans to raise rents for residents of public housing and to shut down hundreds of community centers and resident programs upon which large segments of youth, the elderly and others depend.

The agency’s chairman, Tino Hernandez, said that the rent increases—which would be as high as 15 percent—and the closures were necessary to bridge a \$195 million budget gap.



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