

Businesses & lives trashed after crane horror; no recovery or help in sight

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The ghostly superstructure of a half-built condo tower looms like an 18-story tombstone marking the spot where seven people died in a crane collapse that rocked the city and sparked reform.

A year after the 30-ton tower crane broke from its moorings at 303 E. 51st St. and crashed into the street on March 15, 2008, the Turtle Bay community seems frozen in time - still bearing the scars of the tragedy.

"I am unemployed, I have been treated for posttraumatic stress disorder and had to go into therapy," said John LaGreco, owner of the once-popular Fubar tavern at 305 E. 50th St.

Crave Ceviche won a settlement from Issembert's company after it tried to evict the restaurant. Owner Dino Andreacos is looking for a new site in the neighborhood, said his lawyer Adam Leitman Bailey.

A fenced-in pile of rubble is all that remains of his once-popular watering hole, flattened in an avalanche of bricks and twisted steel.

"The loss of income was huge, and the bar was not fully insured," said LaGreco, 39.

The same is true all up and down the neighborhood, where

six workers and a tourist were killed, 24 people injured and 18 homes evacuated, some of which remain uninhabitable.

Work has been halted at the E. 51st St. tower pending approval of developer James Kennelly's revised plans to comply with zoning. If rejected, the building likely will be torn down.

Kennelly, the crane owner and the city have been hit with scores of lawsuits. A total of 179 claims have been filed against the city alone - seeking \$881 million in damages for displaced tenants, ruined businesses and families of the victims, records show.

On Wednesday the Buildings Department issued a report mirroring federal findings that found rigger William Rapetti used four instead of eight nylon lifting slings, including a damaged sling that tore, sending an 11,000-pound steel collar plummeting down the crane's tower, severing it from the building.

A year later, the fallout from that day is still evident. Around the corner at 946 Second Ave., where the



It looked like a bomb hit on E. 51st St. this time last year.



Now, the street has been cleaned up, but rebuilding is mired in legal delays.

top floors collapsed when the crane mast struck, the awning of the eatery Crave Ceviche is dirty and torn.

A sign on the door proclaims: “No one is allowed in the building without being accompanied by a representative from Ascot Properties.”

“We are waiting to collect from our insurance company, which is dragging its feet,” said Ascot’s Remy Issembert. “I have zero income from the building and have to pay taxes and other costs.”

Issembert said under other conditions it would make sense to tear down the building and rebuild the entire corner. “For that you need money, and we don’t have money,” he said. “And who’s going to do that in this economy?”

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The falling crane sliced off the back wall of a 120-year-old building at 944 Second Ave. A huge blue tarp still covers the damage.

On the first floor inside the shuttered La Moll Cleaners, plastic-wrapped shirts and jackets can be seen through the dirty windows. A vacate order is posted on the door, and a hand-lettered sign provides a number to call for pickup of garments.

Green protective netting rises to the 11th floor of 300 E. 51st St. A notice on the window of the empty ground-floor Rite Aid warns: “Conditions in this premises are imminently perilous to life.”

Building resident Kathleen Tompkins and her two daughters, ages 14 and 16, were a block away when the crane toppled.

“I heard it and turned and watched the whole thing,” she recalled. “We were homeless for nearly two weeks.

“My oldest daughter suffers from a neuromuscular disease and is in a motorized wheelchair,” Tompkins said. “We had to replace all kinds of specialized medical equipment, breathing equipment and special beds and lifts. It was a real hardship.”

Now, Tompkins says, when she looks out the window she can see where the crane once stood. “It makes me sick,” she said.

Turtle Bay Association Vice President Bruce Silberblatt, 81, said he hopes the tragedy will inspire true reform. He’s the retired contractor who had warned the Buildings Department about problems at the site before the crane collapsed.

“Over the year, the department has picked out some rotten apples and promulgated some good new measures,” he said. “If these measures are enforced, I think things will be much safer.”