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## Crane Collapses on Manhattan's East Side, Killing 4



A construction accident on the East Side of Manhattan killed four and injured a dozen others.

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A crane towering over a high-rise construction site on the East Side of Manhattan collapsed in a roar of rending steel Saturday afternoon, raining death and destruction across a city block as it slashed down on an apartment building, broke into sections, crushed a town house and cut away a tenement facade.

At least four people were killed and more than a dozen others were injured, and damage was expected to run into the millions of dollars in what the authorities called one of the city's worst accidents — a calamity that turned a neighborhood near the United Nations into a zone of panic, pulverized buildings, wailing sirens, evacuations, searches in the rubble and covered bodies in the streets.

Many residents of the neighborhood around the site of the collapse — 51st Street between Second and First Avenues — said they had been worried for months about the possibility of a collapse, calling the crane, looming higher each week, a menace, particularly because so many residential buildings were being put up in the area with remarkable speed: several floors a week at times.

Christopher Bianchi, 40, of Manhattan, owner of Crave Ceviche Bar on Second Avenue, said he saw three bodies on stretchers in the street. "Their heads were covered," he said. "One of the police was giving last rites."

Mayor Michael R. Bloomberg arrived at the scene hours later, surrounded by an army of police officers, firefighters, city officials and reporters. “It’s a sad day,” he said, as the lights of scores of emergency vehicles revolved and flashed. “Our thoughts go out to those who were killed, and we pray that those who were injured will recover.”

As people were evacuated from a half-dozen buildings and rescue workers using dogs, listening devices and thermal imaging cameras searched the rubble for victims — taking care to cause no further collapses — the mayor said the four known dead were believed to be construction workers on or near the crane. The injured included at least three civilians taken to hospitals in critical condition.

One man was pulled from the debris nearly four hours after the collapse.



The dead, all believed to be members of Local 15 of the Operating Engineers Union, were identified as Brad Cohen, Aaron Stephens, Anthony Mazza and Wayne Bleidner.

The cause of the accident on a sunny, windless day was unclear and under investigation by city, state and federal agencies. But Stephen Kaplan, an owner of the Reliance Construction Group working at the site, told The Associated Press that a piece of steel had fallen and sheared off one of the girders holding the crane to the building.

A construction worker on the 15th floor, Ismael Garcia, said he saw something fall and strike one or more of the girder ties, weakening or breaking the connections. “Out of the corner of my eye, I saw a piece falling,” he said, and then the crane pulled away.

The collapse occurred, the mayor said, as workers attempted to jack up the crane, raising its height to enable work to continue above the 19th floor of a planned 43-story building. Builders had city permission to raise the crane, and the crane had been inspected on Friday, with no violations found.

The collapse occurred at 2:22 p.m. as the crane, about 22 stories tall and attached by girders to the apartment tower under construction at 303 East 51st Street, east of Second Avenue, broke away from its anchors and toppled south, across the block between 51st and 50th Streets, as workers at the site and people in high-rises for blocks around looked on, stupefied.

Witnesses told of a rising, thundering roar and clouds of smoke and dust as the crane — a vertical latticed boom for its base, topped by a cab and jib, the swinging arm that lifts building materials — fell across 51st Street and onto a 19-story apartment building at No. 300, demolishing a penthouse and shaking the building with the force of an earthquake.



Mayor Michael R. Bloomberg said the top of a construction crane detached and fell onto a four-story town house, destroying the building.

Mike Shatzkin, a resident of the 17th floor, said he was talking on the phone when it hit. “All of a sudden, I felt a very violent shake, and stuff fell off the walls, and my wife said a bomb went off.” After discovering that their building had been struck by the crane from across the street, he said, “We worried about this crane every day.”

The upper reaches of the crane — including the cab and the extended swinging arm — broke away from the boom, which was left leaning against the facade, and hurtled southward across the block toward 50th Street, tumbling in the air, some witnesses said.



Part of a construction crane remained leaning across the street Saturday night after it toppled, crushing one building and damaging others on the East Side of Manhattan.

The crane's blue cab and white jib, itself a latticework of steel, made a direct hit on a four-story town house at 305 East 50th Street, a modern stucco structure with apartments upstairs and a bar called Fubar on the ground floor. The building, on the north side of 50th Street, was demolished.

The bar was not open, and the owner, John P. LaGreco, who had been the proprietor for a decade, said that Juan Perez, 38, a Queens resident and the father of three children, was in Fubar at the time, preparing to open about 4 p.m.

Mayor Bloomberg said one or two people were in the building at the time. The fire commissioner, Nicholas Scoppetta, said that a man, apparently referring to Mr. Perez, was taken alive out of the collapsed town house shortly before 6 p.m. He said there had also been reports of a woman in the building, and search efforts continued late into Saturday night.

In addition to the collapsed town house, the toppling crane jib sheared away the side of a six-story gray tenement building at 301 East 50th, just to the west, exposing tiers of apartments and haunting images of shattered homes: a pink suitcase dangling from the sixth floor, a mattress, a rack of shoes, broken bookshelves.

Debris also damaged buildings on the south side of 50th Street, and bricks demolished parked cars — a dark blue BMW flattened, a Mini Cooper battered with debris.

In the immediate aftermath of the collapse, stunned people rushed into the streets from restaurants and shops, from apartment buildings in the surrounding blocks, many of them unaware of what had happened and fearing the worst.



A victim of a crane collapse on the East Side of Manhattan was carried out on a stretcher as the search for other possible victims in the rubble continued.

Within minutes, an armada of fire engines, police cars, ambulances and other emergency vehicles converged on the scene. Water from broken mains was gushing into the street, and an odor of gas was in the air. City and Consolidated Edison workers quickly moved in to cap the leaks and prevent explosions. Throughout the afternoon and evening, traffic was blocked off for blocks around the site.

Some residents of the area saw or heard the collapse from their apartments. Bruce Silberblatt, a retired building contractor who lives at 860 United Nations Plaza, said: "I heard this big double bang. Bang! Then, bang! The first bang must have been the crane hitting the first building, then the second must

have been everything else going into the street."

Scores of evacuated residents from at least a half-dozen damaged or imperiled buildings were offered shelter at the High School of Art and Design, at 228 East 57th Street, the mayor said.

A Fire Department spokesman said that 13 people were injured and taken to area hospitals. Three had critical injuries and two were listed in serious condition, while the rest, including five firefighters, had minor injuries. Four other people were treated at the scene, the spokesman said.



Emergency workers at the scene of a crane collapse at 51st Street and Second Avenue in Manhattan



Firefighters carried stretchers at the scene of the accident. People were feared trapped beneath the wreckage.

Mayor Bloomberg identified the site's principal developer as James P. Kennelly, a former firefighter, and the construction company as RCG, an apparent acronym for Reliance Construction Group. He said the crane owner was the New York Crane & Equipment Corporation. The manufacturer, he said, was an Australian company known as Favco, which makes a tower crane with an eight-ton lifting capacity.

"There are no words to describe the level of devastation we feel today as a result of this tragic event," Mr. Kennelly said in a statement. While the mayor and other city officials said that there had been a relatively small number of violations issued against the construction site in the more than two years since work began, many residents questioned the safety record at the building site.

"We had been very unhappy with the way he was doing his work," said Mr. Silberblatt, a member of the Turtle Bay Association, a civic group. He cited debris in the streets, a lack of a sidewalk bridge, and other faults.

According to records from the New York City Department of Buildings, the agency has issued 14 violations against contractors doing work at the site, 10 of them against RCG. The citations were issued between Jan. 17, 2006, and Feb. 8 of this year. The violations included failure to safeguard the public and property and failure to provide roof protection on adjacent property.

A Buildings Department spokeswoman, Kate Lindquist, said that of the 14 violations, 13 remained "open" — meaning that a court date is pending or the company did not appear at a scheduled court hearing and the violations are in default status.

Ms. Lindquist said that Buildings Department inspectors performed an inspection of the site Saturday morning in preparation for predicted high winds. Upon inspection, she said, a partial stop-work order was issued to halt all concrete operations at the site. The order was issued because inspectors found material stored too close to the building's edge on several floors. The order did not apply to the extending of the crane, which was under way at the time of the accident, she said.

The last major crane collapse at a construction site in New York occurred in September 1999, when a 383-foot crane fell at 24th Street and the Avenue of the Americas, crushing a carpenter and injuring three other people.

*Reporting for these articles was contributed by Al Baker, Sushil Cheema, John Eligon, Jason Grant, Christine Hauser, Serge F. Kovalski, Colin Moynihan, Anthony Ramirez, Warren St. John and Tanzina Vega.*