



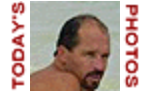
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Nation: Building industry more cautious 20 years after Hyatt Regency collapse

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By KIA SHANT'E BREAU, Associated Press

KANSAS CITY, Mo. (July 14, 2001 6:23 p.m. EDT) - Sally Firestone was all dressed up, standing on a suspended walkway over the lobby of the downtown Hyatt Regency, watching a tea dance below.

The last thing she remembers of that night 20 years ago is a loud "crack" as one skywalk snapped and collapsed onto a second, sending both to the floor in a shower of concrete and steel. She lay unconscious and trapped for hours under the debris, and was left a quadriplegic.

"I'm not really bitter. I'm just amazed that no one discovered the problems with the building," said Firestone, 54, who requires around-the-clock care. "So many things happened along the way that should have been caught."

The collapse on July 17, 1981, killed 114 people and injured more than 200 others, the deadliest structural failure in the nation's history.

It was caused by the failure of steel connections supporting the concrete and glass walkways, and provided a catalyst for changes in construction practices nationwide.

"Since the Hyatt, there has been a lot of activity in the engineering profession to address quality, the final product and how you attain quality," said Paul Munger, chairman of the Missouri Board of Architects, Professional Engineers and Land Surveyors. "The steps taken after the Hyatt helped the industry recover from failure."

Ultimate blame was pinned on the two structural engineers who designed the skywalks. One of them later testified that he never checked the skywalks' connections, and that he thought it was the responsibility of the fabricators to make sure the connections would hold.

It is now an Industry Standard!

After the collapse, the American Society of Civil Engineers adopted a policy that structural engineers are ultimately responsible for reviewing shop drawings by fabricators, said Edward Pfrang, a former ASCE president who also headed the National Bureau of Standards'

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investigation.

While the policy is not legally binding, it would carry some weight in court, Pfrang said.

He said the Hyatt was "one of the worst examples of people trying to push off their responsibilities to other parts of the team."

Munger said the disaster also led to peer reviews in the industry in which engineering firms now call upon other companies to meet with their staff to ensure the proper checks and balances are in place.

An overflow crowd had filled the Hyatt - the city's newest luxury hotel - the night of the collapse.

"The people were dancing and clapping. Everyone was happy and having a good time," recalls Grace Trefts, 63, of St. Louis. She and her husband had finished dinner and planned to walk onto one of the skywalks, but were delayed by errands.

At 7:04 p.m., the band started playing Duke Ellington's "Satin Doll." About a minute later, the 120-foot walkway at the fourth floor level split in two places, falling onto the second-story walkway.

"There were a lot of electrical wires and sparks. I think a water main broke because there was a lot of water on the floor," Trefts said. "Dust was still rising. We all were very, very frightened."

It took 14 hours for rescue workers to pull victims, dead and alive, out of the tangle of steel and concrete. A firefighter had to perform an amputation with a chain saw to free one victim.

Pfrang blamed the disaster on a design change during construction that suspended the second-floor walkway from the fourth-floor walkway, rather than having both suspended separately on a set of rods attached to the lobby ceiling. The skywalks were not designed to hold a third of the weight they held at the time of the collapse, Pfrang said.

An administrative law judge found structural engineers Jack D. Gillum and Daniel M. Duncan negligent. They were stripped of their licenses.

Their lawyer at the time, Lawrence Grebel, said it was not fair that they were held responsible for a change that was made without their knowledge. Gillum refused to talk to The Associated Press about the Hyatt. Neither he nor Grebel knew of Duncan's whereabouts.

Settlements and judgments after the collapse totaled about \$140 million, said Steve Doyal, a spokesman for Hallmark Cards Inc., whose subsidiary Crown Center Redevelopment Corp. owns the hotel.

The largest settlement - about \$12 million - went to Firestone.

The Hyatt reopened three months after the collapse. The skywalks were not rebuilt and there were no more tea dances, although large New Year's Eve parties are held in the lobby each year.

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