

After The Collapse: Why Building Documentation Is Vital to Emergency Response

The alarming structural failure at Pfizer's former headquarters in New York highlights a growing challenge for complex modern building redevelopments. Facilities experts explain why access to accurate records is essential during emergencies.

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(Photo: Adobe Stock / Kristina Blokhin)

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Considering the recent building collapse scare in New York City, it's worth shifting the focus to what happens after these events and how facilities teams can prepare to respond.

The NYC Department of Buildings (DOB) conducts over 400,000 inspections annually. In 2024, inspectors performed a record 416,290 inspections to identify unsafe conditions before they become major structural problems.

Construction-related incidents are relatively uncommon. In 2024, the DOB recorded 638 construction-related incidents citywide — a 24% *decrease* from 2023. Importantly, these incidents include injuries, falls, equipment accidents, and material failures — not building collapses.

The Role Of Building Documentation In Emergencies

When a building fails, even if that's unlikely, the immediate focus is on rescue and safety. But as soon as the site is secure, another race begins. Structural engineers need original drawings. Facility teams need renovation records. Utilities need shutoff locations. Insurers need documentation. Investigators need the building's history. None of those answers come from the rubble. They come from the information organizations have preserved, or in some cases, failed to preserve.

There's a broader point that facility professionals understand well: in a crisis, documentation is part of the emergency response. And the organizations that can quickly produce accurate building information are far better positioned to support investigators, protect occupants, and begin the long process of recovery.

"Nobody worries about having updated and accurate drawings until something like this happens. And I'd say it's also a good reminder to everyone to practice evac drills of different types so tenants are prepared as well," said Gretchen Martin, Treasurer for IFMA Pittsburgh.

"You have to have the complete history, or mistakes could be made thinking something can structurally support an addition when in reality it can't," Martin added.

Why A History Of Construction Matters

Facilities management consultant George Gallo of Creative Innovations & Design, is a big believer in assessments.

"First thing is the assessment created by the first responders on areas impacted and why. Then the building engineers need to assess the damage themselves," Gallo said. "This is needed to ensure that the initial assessment is correct. Sometimes a visual

inspection can lead to a false conclusion (a crack may be just visual and not structural). While it is better to err on the side of safety, false assessments can delay needed repairs. All damage should be photographed and, especially for potential structural damage, x-rayed to see if stress cracks pose immediate danger,” Gallo advised.

“A history of the construction would show several important things. First, it will show the building code that was used during construction. This provides vital insight into how a building was constructed and what materials were used. Second, knowing what was done during renovations allows engineers to see into how the existing structure was kept up and, if changes were made, if they were structural or not. Third, materials are listed. Depending on what materials were used, certain remediations may have to occur prior to any work being performed (e.g. asbestos). Fourth, based on all information, a building may have passed its useful life. You can weigh the cost of certain materials being abated and corrected into the equation if it would be more cost effective to demolish the building and start from scratch,” Gallo added.

This kind of information is usually revealed in construction closeouts, but turnovers are often delayed. Delays can impact the safe operation and ongoing maintenance of buildings, a topic discussed in [If Drawings Could Speak, Oh the Stories They’d Tell](#).

Tim Kittila, Director of Facility Assessments for Kraus-Anderson Construction, explained that when a building suffers a catastrophic failure, documentation is often missing, outdated, or impossible to find.

“Dates and times of renovations, changes, modifications get lost in the shuffle. Also, with the transitioning of building staff, usually an immense amount of knowledge walks out the door with the loss of those personnel. It’s usually not well documented, detailed, or put in a place where the next person can find it and utilize the information,” Kittila noted.

“I’m big on knowledge transfer and documenting not just the facts of the building, but the anecdotal anomalies that come inherent with a facility,” Kittila added. “Those anecdotes can be helpful when putting together recommendations on how the building really is performing (or not performing).”

How Prepared Are You For An Emergency Situation?

An [ARC Facilities survey](#) of more than 60 professionals revealed the following:

- Only a small group reported being very confident that documentation is complete and accessible.
- During design and construction phases, a majority reported being very involved from early design.
- A small percentage described minimal or no involvement during the design/construction phases.

So, the question is: how well-documented are your building's assets and how accessible is this information before, during, and after emergencies?