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Surfside, Fla., Condo Collapse: From Glimmering Beaches to Ruin

Champlain Towers South's deterioration over decades led to one of the deadliest building failures in U.S. history

An aerial view of the site where Champlain Towers South once stood in Surfside, Fla. The causes of the June collapse, which killed 98 people, remain under investigation.

By Arian Campo-Flores and Scott Calvert | Photographs by Marco Bello for The Wall Street Journal

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SURFSIDE, Fla.—In 2017, Abraham Topp and his brother took over the Champlain Towers South condo where their parents had lived happily for two decades on an idyllic stretch of beach—and quickly found signs of trouble.

Water persistently leaked into the underground garage below the pool deck, Mr. Topp said. Workers regularly pulled up pavers on the deck to perform repairs. The amount of work the tower needed was piling up, triggering talk among residents of a looming assessment in the millions of dollars to foot the bill.

Mr. Topp told a maintenance worker in the building that he and his brother planned to sell the unit, which eventually they did in 2019. He said the man replied: Good call.



The view from the 10th-floor unit in Champlain Towers South owned by Susana Alvarez. She said a town building official told residents in 2018, 'Your building is in very good shape.'

PHOTO: SUSANA ALVAREZ

"I don't like the way the building is holding up," Mr. Topp, 61 years old, said the worker told him. "One of the columns in the garage looks like it's leaning."

Once classy and cutting edge, Champlain Towers South deteriorated over decades to a corroded, leaky and unstable structure that crumpled this year in one of the deadliest building failures in U.S. history. The causes of the collapse, which killed 98 people, remain under investigation. A [combination of problems likely were at fault](#), including design flaws, poor construction and delayed maintenance, engineers say.

Beyond the loss of life, the building's demise illustrates all that can go wrong with the joint ownership model at the heart of the condo-building waves that have helped fuel American real-estate development. Once a builder finishes a project, unit owners must take responsibility for the building's upkeep, usually through elected condo boards. As the maintenance tab swells over time, getting scores of ever-changing unit owners to pay can become increasingly difficult, leading to deferred repairs.

Champlain Towers South was born with great promise and sold to buyers beckoned by the allure of owning a piece of beachfront property.

As the shine wore off the building, it showed signs of distress. Some owners sought to address the problems, while others resisted or sold their units to avoid responsibility. Squabbles broke out among residents. By the time the board united behind a plan, it was too late.

'A piece of paradise'

When Champlain Towers South opened in 1981, Mayor Mitchell Kinzer saw it as an asset that promised to launch a new era of luxury development in the town. After a ribbon-cutting, the developers invited the mayor up to one of the high-floor units for a look around. "It was amazing up there. The water was crystal clear," said Mr. Kinzer, now 70.

The developers marketed Champlain Towers South as an elegant escape, but they priced the units across a wide range, making smaller ones with less-alluring views affordable for middle-class buyers.

When Miryam Flint moved into Champlain Towers South in 1981, she felt she had secured a piece of paradise, she said.

The building offered saunas, a heated pool and valet parking.

"It was a beautiful project," said Ms. Flint, now 72, who sold her fourth-floor unit after three years to buy a bigger place.

In 1984, Judit and Horacio Groisman bought a sixth-floor unit after he landed his first job as a doctor. The couple paid \$186,500, county records show, or about \$492,000 in today's dollars.

The couple hosted birthday parties for their two children in the recreation room and barbecues beneath thatched huts near the beach. "It was such an 'it' building," said Ms. Groisman, 68.

Cascading assessments

In 1988, the Groismans sold their unit, 611, to Gustavo Tames Jr., for \$180,000, or about \$418,000 in today's dollars. Returning home from his work as owner of an auto-repair shop specializing in European vehicles, he would pour himself a glass of scotch and head to the hot tub to unwind.



Miryam Flint, third from left, with family members in her fourth-floor unit at Champlain Towers South in the early 1980s. She said, 'It was a beautiful project.'

PHOTO: DENISE MARINO

As the years passed, he noticed that sometimes water dripped from the ceiling of the underground garage, below the pool deck. Because the seepage would stain residents' cars, maintenance workers installed aluminum gutters below the areas that leaked, directing water to fall between vehicles.

"That's not too cool," Mr. Tames, 63, remembered thinking. But "it didn't alarm me."

When he and his wife at the time went through a divorce in 1994, they sold the unit for \$200,000, or \$377,000 today. Around then, Mr. Tames learned that the building's condo board was [planning to charge owners an assessment](#) that would result in an additional monthly payment of roughly \$400 for their unit, on top of the \$400 or so they paid in monthly maintenance fees.

Water was siphoning through the pool deck to the garage below, he said.

The \$156,000 repair took place in 1996 and 1997, according to documents filed with the town. Workers installed a layer of waterproofing and pavers on the pool deck, and they removed loose concrete and treated steel rebar with rust-inhibiting coating in the garage. They refurbished about 20 square feet of cracked concrete in the garage ceiling, the documents said.

Magda and Jose Pelaez, who bought Mr. Tames's unit in 1994, were disgruntled about the assessment for that work but concluded it was worthwhile.

The couple, who lived in nearby Hialeah, used the condo unit for weekend getaways.



Gustavo Tames Jr. bought a Champlain Towers South unit in 1988. As the years passed, he noticed water leakage in the garage. 'That's not too cool,' he remembered thinking.

Around 2001, they learned that the board planned to make another assessment, this time to reinforce the building's balconies.

The looming bill prompted the couple to sell unit 611 in 2002. "We said, 'No, no, this is getting out of control with the assessments,' " said Ms. Pelaez, 72.

The project, which took place mostly in 2002, involved chipping balconies down to the rebar to see whether it had rusted and needed to be sandblasted and recoated, according to documents filed with the town. Notes by the contractor said some balconies were cracked, and in a few instances workers had to completely replace the decks.

Substantial restoration work on the building languished over the next decade and a half, according to some residents. That worried Albert Eskenazi, a contractor who bought a sixth-floor unit in 2004 for about \$473,000 in today's dollars and sold it two years later for 73% more, after upgrading to a larger ninth-floor unit.

At first he loved living at Champlain Towers South, he said, but over time disconcerting flaws became apparent. Pavers on the pool deck came loose and juttied up, allowing water to penetrate, he said. During a storm, he observed sliding-glass doors in the building bulging like they were about to pop.

"I could see things were deteriorating," said Mr. Eskenazi, 61, who lived there with his girlfriend, now his wife.

He said he raised his concerns with the condo board, but he said no action was taken. He feared the accumulating list of problems was likely to generate a hefty bill for owners at some point, on top of the roughly \$600 a month in regular maintenance fees.

"I said, '\$600 is enough. I don't want to start paying extra assessments,'" Mr. Eskenazi said. "We decided to just get out."

He sold the unit in 2009 for \$38,000 less than he paid.

Ego battles and mistruths

What residents at the time didn't know is that the tower's troubles were far deeper than the visible signs of deterioration suggested, according to an earlier Wall Street Journal investigation. The structural slabs of the building rested on thin columns without the support of beams in some areas. Special heavy walls used to reinforce

structures were also deficient. Some parts lacked sufficient rebar, while in others builders put too little protective concrete over rebar.



Engineers say a combination of problems likely caused the building collapse, including design flaws, poor construction and delayed maintenance.

In early 2018, as the building neared the end of its fourth decade, the condo board began preparing for a Miami-Dade County requirement that buildings undergo an inspection when they reach 40 years and that any needed repairs be performed. That July, the board hired an engineering firm, Morabito Consultants, to conduct structural and engineering inspections.

The firm's report in October 2018 delivered sobering findings. Failed waterproofing below the pool deck and entrance drive had caused major structural damage to the concrete slab—a problem that would “expand exponentially” if not addressed, the report said. It called the design of the slab, which was flat rather than sloped to allow water to drain, a “major error” and found that many columns in the garage were cracked and needed to be repaired soon.

At a board meeting in the building's recreation room a month later, Rosendo Prieto, a town building official, addressed concerned residents, said Susana Alvarez, who owned a 10th-floor unit. "He said, 'I wouldn't worry too much. Your building is in very good shape,'" she recalled.

Ms. Alvarez said she gave a relieved look to a friend and thought, "This is no big deal. Great."

The board made little progress the following year as its members became consumed with personal conflicts, said Ms. Alvarez, 63, who regularly attended meetings.



Susana Alvarez, left, who owned a 10th-floor unit in the Champlain Towers South, and her mother, Hortensia Alvarez.

PHOTO: SUSANA ALVAREZ

In September 2019, board President Anette Goldstein —the daughter of one of the building's developers—resigned, citing "ego battles, undermining the roles of fellow board members, circulation of gossip and mistruths," according to a letter she sent to residents. Ms. Goldstein declined to comment.

Over the next two weeks, four other board members resigned, and a new group took control at a contentious board meeting Oct. 3.

A woman who became the new board president barreled through a speech she had written in which she accused an

existing board member of unethical conduct.

"I was totally in shock," Ms. Alvarez said. "That was the lowest point of that building."

'Earthquake, earthquake'

In February 2020, residents elected a new board, led by Jean Wodnicki. At a board meeting that October, she presented an overview of the renovation plan, whose

estimated cost initially was about \$9 million.

Ms. Wodnicki told those who dialed in that the lack of waterproofing over portions of the garage had exposed it to water intrusion for nearly 40 years. Inspections had found 131 areas of balconies with potentially deteriorated rebar. Two months later, the building manager said the estimated cost of repairs had climbed to about \$15 million.

As 2021 began, the board pressed ahead. In a letter to residents four days ahead of an April 13 vote on the assessment, Ms. Wodnicki wrote, “A lot of this work could have been done or planned for in years gone by. But this is where we are now.”

Some residents signed a petition seeking to lower the assessment to \$12 million. But on the day of the vote, board members approved the \$15 million assessment.

A little before 1 a.m., June 24, Gabriel Nir, whose family had been renting a first-floor unit since January, was baking salmon when he noticed a knocking noise, he said. His mother, Sara Nir, heard it too and remarked that she hoped it would soon stop.

After a while, the banging grew louder.

Mr. Nir, 25, recalled his mother taking a short walk to the lobby to alert the security guard. Mr. Nir heard an even louder rumble and a big splash. Though he didn’t realize it at the time, the pool deck had crashed into the garage below. His mother screamed from the lobby, “Earthquake, earthquake!”

Mr. Nir said he grabbed his 15-year-old sister, and they rushed out as their unit filled with dust. Just outside the condo building’s front entrance, he saw that a street-level parking area near the pool deck was gone.



Gabriel Nir, whose family had been renting a first-floor unit, escaped Champlain Towers South just before it collapsed.

At 1:22 a.m., county records show, Mr. Nir spoke with a 911 operator. About 20 seconds in, a thunderous noise is audible on a recording of the call. A large section of Champlain Towers South, including their unit, had just tumbled.

“Holy shit!” Mr. Nir shouted.

As the Nirs ran, the 911 operator asked what he was seeing. “I heard Miami Beach say something about a bridge collapse,” the operator said.

“Yeah, yeah,” he said.

“A bridge collapsed?” the operator asked.

“No,” Mr. Nir said. “A building.”