

Four Die in



On March 22, 1972, fire originated in the seventh story of the William Sloane House, a YMCA residence on Thirty-fourth Street between Eighth and Ninth Avenues on Manhattan's West Side. A delayed alarm allowed the fire to gain considerable headway before fire fighters arrived. As a result of this fire four elderly men died, three of smoke inhalation and one of smoke inhalation and burns.

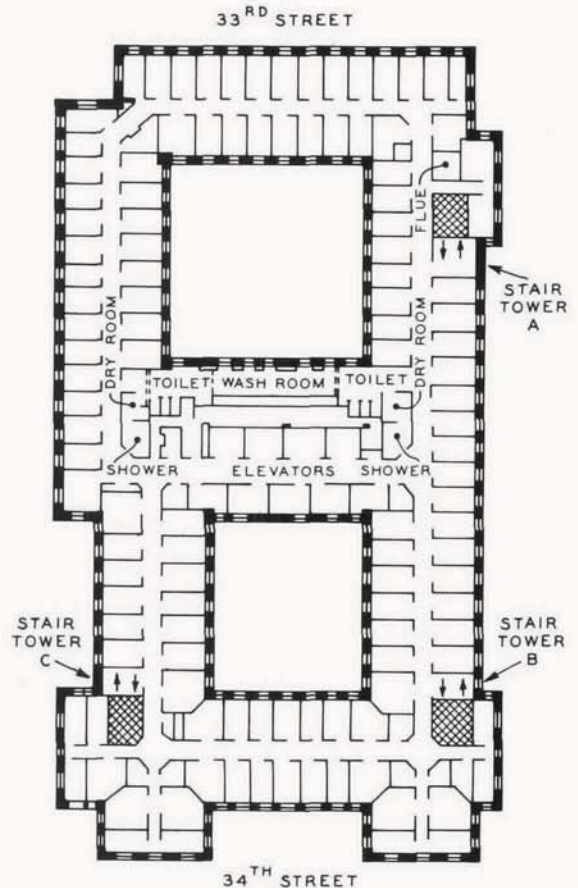
Sloane House is a 14-story fire-resistive building containing 1,492 rooms. The 200-by-115-foot reinforced-concrete building, constructed in 1930, is rectangular, with two interior light wells that are open at the top. Each floor is served by four manually operated passenger elevators and three enclosed stair towers. The

The author is indebted to the New York City Fire Department for assistance during his visit to the city to obtain information for this article.



Top: The Thirty-fourth Street side of William Sloane House shortly after the arrival of the Fire Department WIDE WORLD

Above: Aerial ladder operations rescued many occupants. NYCFD



New York YMCA Fire

By LAURENCE D. WATROUS

Supervisor, NFPA Fire Record Department

elevators discharge to a central corridor opening to two corridors that are at right angles to it (see the diagram). The central corridors in turn open to a corridor at each end of the building. These corridors have no doors to subdivide the floor areas or to halt spread of heat and smoke. The interior finish in these corridors consists of painted walls and ceilings and carpet on the floor.

The rooms are arranged off each side of the corridors, except on the elevator corridor, where there are rooms on only one side. Access to each room is through a solid-core wood door hung in a metal frame. All the windows are constructed of metal sash in metal frames.

The building is equipped with a local evacuation alarm system that operates from manual pull stations located in the corridors. Each stair tower contains a six-inch wet standpipe with a gated 2½-inch outlet at each floor level. One-and-a-half-inch hose is stored on a rack adjacent to the standpipes and connected through a 2½-by-1½-inch reducer. The standpipes were supplied from street mains and from siamese connections located on both the Thirty-fourth Street and Thirty-third Street sides of the building.

Several years ago the YMCA was opened to women residents. Since that time the building slowly changed from a lodging place for short-stay guests to a semi-permanent residence for many elderly people. It is an inexpensive place to stay, and shops nearby offer food and other necessities.

At the time of the fire many of the rooms on the seventh floor were being redecorated. Painters were applying water-based paint to the walls and ceilings of each room. To facilitate the work most of the furniture from those rooms had been moved into the corridors. The wardrobe from each of the rooms was one of the articles placed in the corridors. Of light wood-panel construction, the wardrobes measured roughly seven feet high and three to four feet wide and approximately 18 inches deep.

On the night of the fire, officials estimate, there were 1,000 people of all ages in the building — a considerable proportion of them elderly residents.

The fire was reported to the Fire Department at 9:54 pm when someone pulled a street fire alarm box. The Fire Department alarm center dispatched three engines,

two ladder trucks, a rescue, and a battalion chief. Arriving fire fighters found heavy smoke coming from the seventh story of the building on the Thirty-fourth Street side and many people hanging from windows on the Thirty-third Street side. A second alarm was promptly called for, to summon an additional four engines, one ladder truck, a division chief, and a battalion chief to the fire scene. Before the fire had been brought under control four more ladder truck companies were needed for search and rescue.

First-arriving engine companies went to the floor below the fire and advanced 2½-inch hose lines from the standpipes in the stair towers to the fire floor. Engine companies promptly connected hose lines to the siamese connections on both sides of the building and supplied additional water to the standpipes.

While some of the ladder truck companies were rescuing seventh-floor occupants over ladders and stair towers, others checked the upper floors for fire and smoke extension and ventilated the smoke. More than 25 people had to be rescued over ladders from the seventh floor, as the fire had cut off their means of egress. Locked doors hampered Fire Department search and rescue operations. Besides the doors to the rooms, all the doors to the seventh floor from the stair towers had to be forced open. Fire fighters told everyone to leave the building. Those above and below the seventh floor left by means of stair towers and elevators (the elevators were usable because, as was noted earlier, they were manually operated, and thus they could be taken past the fire floor with minimal danger to the occupants).

The fire was under control shortly after the Fire Department arrived, and it was declared out one hour after the alarm had been received. It had spread nearly throughout the seventh floor. Only the corridor at the end of the building parallel to Thirty-third Street remained free of fire damage. The doors to the rooms had prevented the fire from extending into the rooms.

Investigation revealed the fire originated in a wood wardrobe in the elevator lobby on the seventh floor and that an employee had been looking through the wardrobe, using a match for a light, when he accidentally dropped the match into one of them. Papers at the bottom of this wardrobe immediately ignited and the

(Continued on page 38)

priorities — target hazards, fatalities, employee complaints, and all others, in that order. Many large-loss-of-life industrial accidents during the last year have involved fire or explosion. Since accidents involving fatalities are high on the list of OSHA priorities, we might expect increased emphasis on these special fire-related problems.

OSHA's Future. Along with a growing OSHA expertise born of experience during its first year, we can expect during the second year to see heavy emphasis on achieving the intent of Congress to have the states assume full responsibility for developing and enforcing state plans. Meanwhile, the expected reactions from the public, industry, unions, and Congress are being carefully analyzed by the administration. On the one hand, a Ralph Nader Task Force Report entitled *Occupational Epidemic* severely criticizes the Department of Labor in its administration of OSHA and goes on to suggest that the Act be strengthened. On the other hand, there were, at last count, over 60 bills in Congress to amend the *Occupational Safety and Health Act of 1970*. These range from exempting small businesses to separating requirements for heavy construction from light construction and to removing OSHA's use of national consensus standards under Section 6 (a). The appropriations bill for the Department of Labor contained an exemption

from OSHA inspections for businesses with 15 or fewer employees. (This would have removed 4.2 million establishments and 15 million employees from Federal enforcement.) However, President Nixon vetoed the bill, mainly because it was over his budget.

The real question for the NFPA is how OSHA will meet its fire-related standards-making responsibilities after April 1973, under Section 6 (b) of the Act. The Secretary of Labor can form his own committees to write standards or he can turn to the NFPA or other standards-making groups. His choice depends largely on the ability of the NFPA to meet the needs of OSHA.

The NFPA Industrial Fire Protection Section. In the 1970 runaway bestseller *Future Shock* Alvin Toffler asks if consensus is dead. I say NO! I believe industry, unions, consumers, and the Federal Government can resolve their differences on desired levels of safety and on how to achieve these levels. After all, the NFPA has been a model of this process for 76 years. Our young republic, America, has been a model of this process for nearly 200 years. While it is true the Federal Government is becoming more and more involved in the private sector, we in that private sector have ample opportunity to manage our own destiny. You have in the NFPA Industrial Section an ideal mechanism for this. I hope you use it to the fullest. △

Four Die in New York YMCA Fire (continued from page 33)

employee attempted to stamp the fire out. When he heard someone coming, he became frightened and closed the door to the wardrobe and left. He entered the stair tower, walked to the basement, and then returned to the lobby and waited. Shortly after he arrived in the lobby someone came in from the street screaming that there was a fire. Someone then pulled the nearby street fire alarm box to summon the Fire Department.

The fire spread rapidly through the wood wardrobes on the seventh floor, trapping four victims. The two men who died from smoke inhalation were found in rooms that smoke had entered around loose-fitting doors. The other two men were found in the corridor.

Fire fighters found severe fire and smoke on the seventh floor, but very little smoke on the eighth floor and none on the sixth. The quick response of the Fire Department, the effectiveness of the vertical cutoffs, and the structural integrity of the building prevented

the fire from extending to the adjacent floors.

No one remembers whether the manual fire alarm system was operated or not. Had the building been equipped with an automatic detection system, the occupants of the seventh floor would probably have been alerted in time to make their way through the corridors to the stair towers. In all likelihood, automatic sprinklers would have confined the fire to the elevator lobby area and would have put it out before the development of lethal smoke conditions.

The building contained the fire very well; much like a furnace. However, travelers should not be expected to stop overnight in a furnace. Proper protection should be provided for all places of residence, especially where many people are housed and where they are unfamiliar with the exit arrangements. Fire protection in the form of fire-resistive construction is not adequate fire protection for the lives of occupants. △