

NATIONAL POST

OPINION

Frenzy of rising condos, fears over falling glass



Balcony glass has been removed.

Tim Fraser for National Post

Peter Kuitenbrouwer, National Post · Aug. 18, 2011 |

My kids and I, walking to their summer camp in downtown Toronto Tuesday, found Bay Street blocked by a police officer - standing in front of Toronto Police Headquarters - who forbade us from continuing. The constable stopped traffic to get us across the west side, where we proceeded up Bay, under the scaffolding of yet another tall glass tower rising skyward.

"There is glass falling off those towers," the officer explained.

The two towers completed on Bay Street between Grenville and Grosvenor streets, and the third tower rising across the way, are projects of Lanterra Development. The company has come under scrutiny in recent weeks after panes of glass on the balconies apparently spontaneously broke and sent glass plummeting onto the sidewalks below. Tuesday, two glass panels fell off a Lanterra tower at 1 Bedford St. in the Annex. In July the Festival Towers, a high-rise perched above the TIFF Bell Lightbox built by Daniels, spat two balcony panels onto King Street.

Lanterra in a news release late Wednesday wished "a speedy recovery" to a woman injured by falling glass from its Grenville Street building, and said it will replace the tempered glass balconies on its two Bay Street towers, and the 1 Bedford tower, with laminated glass "that closely resembles the type of safety glass utilized in automobile windshields."

Torn yellow police tape fluttered across Bedford Wednesday afternoon; a crane from Skyway Canada unloaded steel pipe and workers in hard hats toiled, erecting new scaffolding around the base of the 34-storey tower.

"I think it's weird, it's been happening in Toronto a lot lately," said Daniel Farrelly, 23, a pedestrian walking past the tower, en route to his job at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education. "I'm not sure what's to blame.... These condos keep popping up everywhere you look."

Still, Mr. Farrelly said, "I'm not too concerned." He moved here two years ago from Montreal, which, he notes, "has its own problems with infrastructure. We're more tunnels and bridges and overpasses."

At least Montreal's struggles involve 40-to 50-year-old structures crying out for replacement. It seems more troubling when the structures are brand new. Pity the purchasers of the new Lanterra condos on Bay, known as Murano: A sign in the lobby forbids them going onto their balconies until further notice. The building also closed its pool and podium roof patio over fears of falling glass.

By city fiat, workers have removed all the glass from the balconies on the north tower. The troubles have inspired gallows humour: A poster in the south lobby announces, "Murano Sociable. Are you getting to know people around the building and want to break the glass ... I mean the ice? Come to the Break Free Fall Mixer, Tuesday Aug. 23 in the party room."

But for many residents and pedestrians, and Councillor Kristyn Wong-Tam (Toronto Centre-Rosedale), this is no laughing matter.

"I am very worried because I don't know how far reaching this is," the councillor says. "We have now had it in four towers in a short period of time. There could be impurities in the glass. Is it a production problem? This happened in buildings with different glass, different architects, different developers and different design. We need an investigation. This cannot take months."

A Toronto Order to Remedy Unsafe Building, affixed with packing tape at the entrance to the Lanterrabuilt tower at 38 Grenville St., notes that, "the glass balcony guard panel in suite 3102 South Tower has shattered and fallen out of the balcony railing assembly. You are required to retain the services of a structural engineer to assess the structural integrity of glass balcony guard panels throughout the building," "formulate a repair plan that will alleviate any unsafe conditions," and "carry out remedial action."

Ms. Wong-Tam wants more. "There needs to be an investigation that is broader than that," she says. "City staff needs to be on site to audit the work."

Our city is enjoying a condo-building frenzy unmatched, I would venture, in the history of any Canadian city. Perhaps it is time to slow the pace and build our city with more care.

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