

# HOW SAFE ARE BUILDING FAÇADES?

## INSPECTING FOR UNSAFE CONDITIONS

By Michael Petermann and Jeffrey Erdly

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The late Clayford T. Grimm, ASTM member and masonry guru, wrote in the March 2000 issue of *The Construction Specifier* that “Masonry falls off a building façade somewhere in the United States about every three weeks. Over the past few years in the United States, at least 49 such masonry failures have killed 30 persons and injured 81.”

There are over 15,000 buildings currently subject to local municipal laws in various cities throughout the United States that require periodic inspection of building façades. These local laws are typically known as façade ordinances (see sidebar, this page). Their purpose is to identify unsafe conditions — loose façade components or materials — that may fall and cause damage to property, or injury and possibly death to pedestrians. These ordinances have come about because of previous damage to property, injury to pedestrians, and loss of life suffered in some of our cities as noted by Grimm. Some cities have stringent requirements for personnel required to do the inspections, while others do not. Some cities require hands-on inspection (touching of façade components or materials) of all façades by licensed architects or engineers while other cities only require visual inspection of street-facing façades by architects, engineers, or contractors.

ASTM Subcommittee E06.55 on Performance of Exterior Wall Systems has approved a standard practice that outlines

the requirements and procedures for conducting façade inspections. The standard [E2270-05, Standard Practice for Periodic Inspection of Building Façades for Unsafe Conditions]<sup>1</sup> is intended for adoption by model building codes, local municipalities, or private owners of multiple buildings, such as universities. The availability of this standard makes it possible for many cities that do not have a façade ordinance to adopt one.

### A Brief History of Façade Ordinances

The concept of laws protecting the public from building façades is not new. In fact, Hammurabi’s Code of Laws (1700 B.C.) had several provisions related to the safety of buildings (see sidebar, page 10). However, the roots of “modern” façade ordinances are relatively young and date back to only 1976 A.D. when the first façade ordinance in the United States (outside of seismic zones) was passed in Chicago, Illinois. Unfortunately, Chicago’s ordinance was repealed on a technicality because when the new laws were published, the section on the façade ordinance was omitted, according to the 1996 *Proceedings of the Chicago Committee on High Rise Buildings*. After a long hiatus, a new façade ordinance went into effect in 1996 in Chicago. The longest continuous façade ordinance in effect dates back to 1980 in New York City.

What is most common about the existence of these ordinances is that, in most cases, they were developed at the expense of either serious injury or even death to pedes-

trians. Some of the older ordinances have also been modified over time by high-profile façade failures. In Columbus, Ohio, City Councilman Ben Espy lost part of his leg one day in 1984 when a large section of a building’s cornice fell to the sidewalk, as reported in the June 29, 1984, edition of the *Cincinnati Enquirer*. Three other pedestrians were injured. Columbus’s facade ordinance became known locally as the Espy Law. In the case of New York City, an 18-year-old college student perished in 1979 when a piece of masonry fell from a Manhattan building and struck her in the head. In Chicago in 1974, a 48-year-old woman was killed after masonry fell approximately 16 stories and struck her. More recently, Chicago lost one of its residents when a piece of glass struck a mother who was

### CITIES THAT HAVE FAÇADE ORDINANCES ON THE BOOKS:

**BOSTON**  
**CHICAGO**  
**COLUMBUS**  
**DETROIT**  
**MILWAUKEE**  
**NEW YORK**  
**PITTSBURGH**  
**ST. LOUIS**

walking along the street with her 3-year-old daughter. Despite the lessons learned in several cities that now have façade ordinances, many other cities still do not.

### Was Chicken Little Right? Is the Sky Falling?

On December 7, 1997, only two months after the initial task group meeting of E06.55.05 on Façade Inspections, brick rained down from the 33rd floor of a 39-story Manhattan office building located at 540 Madison Avenue, slightly injuring two passersby and closing Madison Avenue at the height of the Christmas shopping season. While New York City had in force the country's oldest continuous façade inspection law, "Local Law 10," which only required the visual inspection of street-facing building façades, the site of this collapse was not covered because it was a side façade demarking the property line. The raining debris penetrated through the roof of the adjacent five-story building and also onto the sidewalk and street.

New York City's Local Law 10 required only remote visual inspection of certain façades. Problems with this scope and type of façade inspection had surfaced years before when two chunks of granite fell from the Manhattan Municipal Building. The following excerpt, contained in an editorial from the December 9, 1991, issue of *ENR*, titled "Chicken Little, the Sky is Falling," identified these deficiencies and their possible cause:

The problem is that the city's façade law – written for public safety – requires only visual inspection from some distance of buildings taller than six stories every five years. The Municipal Building had been inspected, as required, a year before the stones were discovered.

A façade law that does not require physical inspection is seriously flawed. Instead of protecting the public, it can actually create danger by giving even responsible building owners a false sense of security about the condition and safety of their façades. A physical inspection often is required to pinpoint deterioration, such as rusted connections and supports that are hidden from view.

How did that "visual-only" provision find its way into the law? Powerful

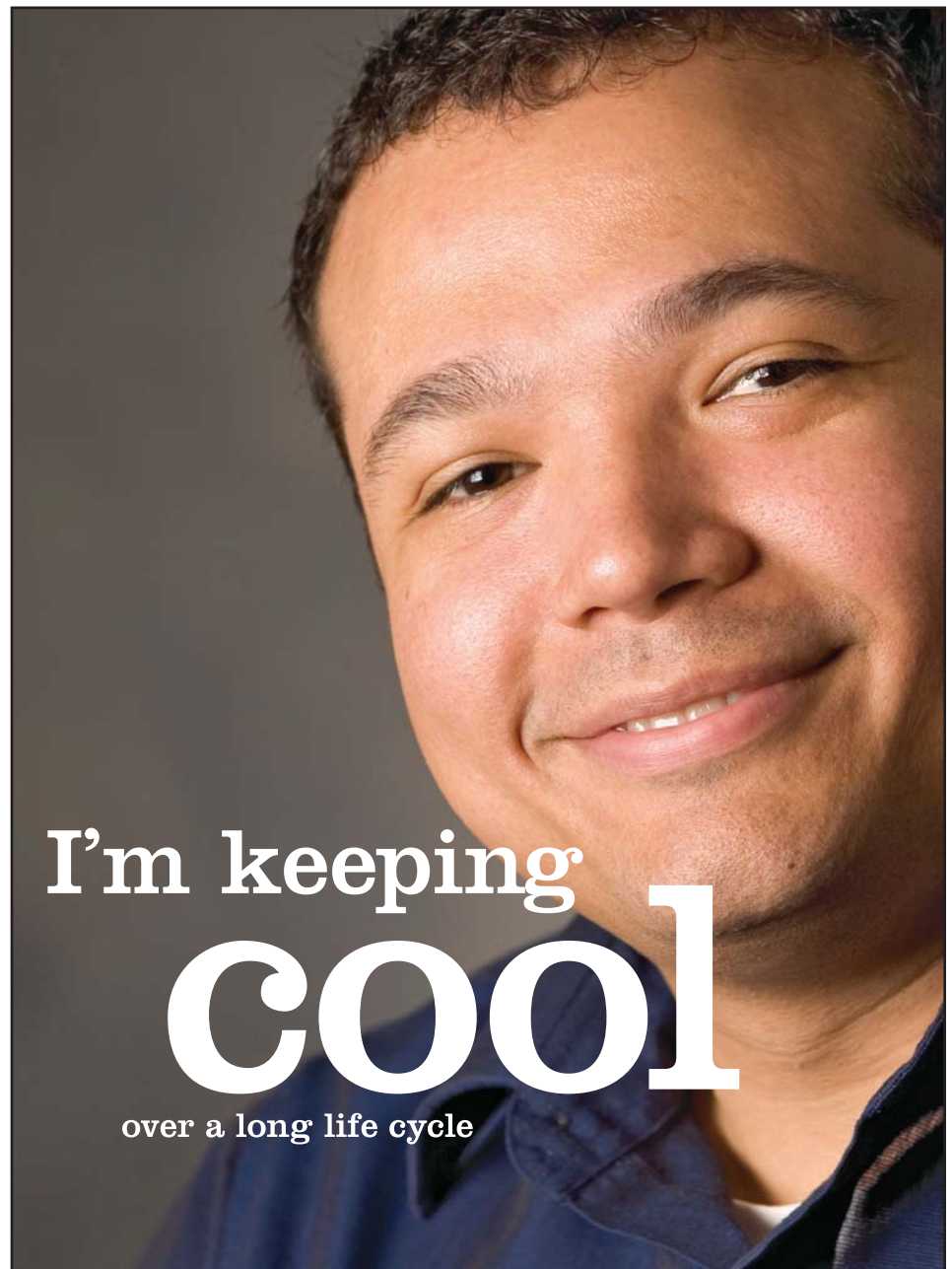
real estate interests, says one New York City-based consulting engineer. The cost of a physical inspection, which typically requires hanging scaffolds, can exceed the cost of visual examination by \$5,000 to \$20,000, depending on the age, configuration, and design of a building, says the consultant.

### Striking a Balance Using Consensus Standards

ASTM International's new Standard E 2270, Practice for Periodic Inspection of Building Façades for Unsafe Conditions, is

the result of six years' work by industry stakeholders who, without the pressures of competing political and owner interests, created a practical standard following the rigorous consensus process that is the hallmark of ASTM. Formation of the Façade Inspection Task Group was approved during the spring of 1997, and its first meeting was held in San Diego, Calif., in October of that year.

Two opposing concerns were identified during the first task group meeting: some were concerned that a standard that was too demanding of building owners would



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*Figure 1 – Cracked masonry over a window opening is a typical condition façade inspectors should identify and classify. Knowledge of the exterior wall type is required in order to classify the condition.*

preclude its adoption by municipalities, rendering it useless, while others wanted a much higher standard than current façade ordinances required. Additional concerns evolved over the qualifications of those performing façade inspections as well as concern over the potential disruption to historic façades. These competing concerns were addressed through consensus development of the standard. The standard is designed for adoption by authorities who will have to decide which buildings within their jurisdiction require the inspection. The standard provides a comprehensive benchmark based upon review of the existing façade ordinances and the experience of members of Subcommittee E06.55 on Performance of Exterior Wall Systems.

The ASTM members who created this standard represent leading forensic architectural and engineering firms practicing in North America. Additional participants included industry associations, material manufacturers, public and private institutional facility owners, and contractors. Members who currently perform façade inspections in the cities with an existing ordinance brought their experience to the table to assist in preparation of the document.

### **Conducting Façade Inspections for Unsafe Conditions**

Façade inspections should be performed by licensed architects or engineers who are knowledgeable in the design and construction of building façades. But more importantly, the façade inspector should have experience in the stability and deterioration mechanisms relating to the specific materials and assemblies of the façade being inspected. It is important that the building owner carefully consider the experience of the façade inspector (architect or engineer) because someone's life or liveli-

hood may depend upon it. There is no state-sanctioned test or licensing of façade inspectors. None of the existing façade ordinances qualifies the inspector beyond being a licensed architect or engineer. When the economy is slow, some design architects and engineers

will pursue façade inspection work to help make ends meet. However, they are sometimes ill prepared for performing the inspection and can be remiss in identifying the type of façade construction as well as the potential deterioration mechanisms.

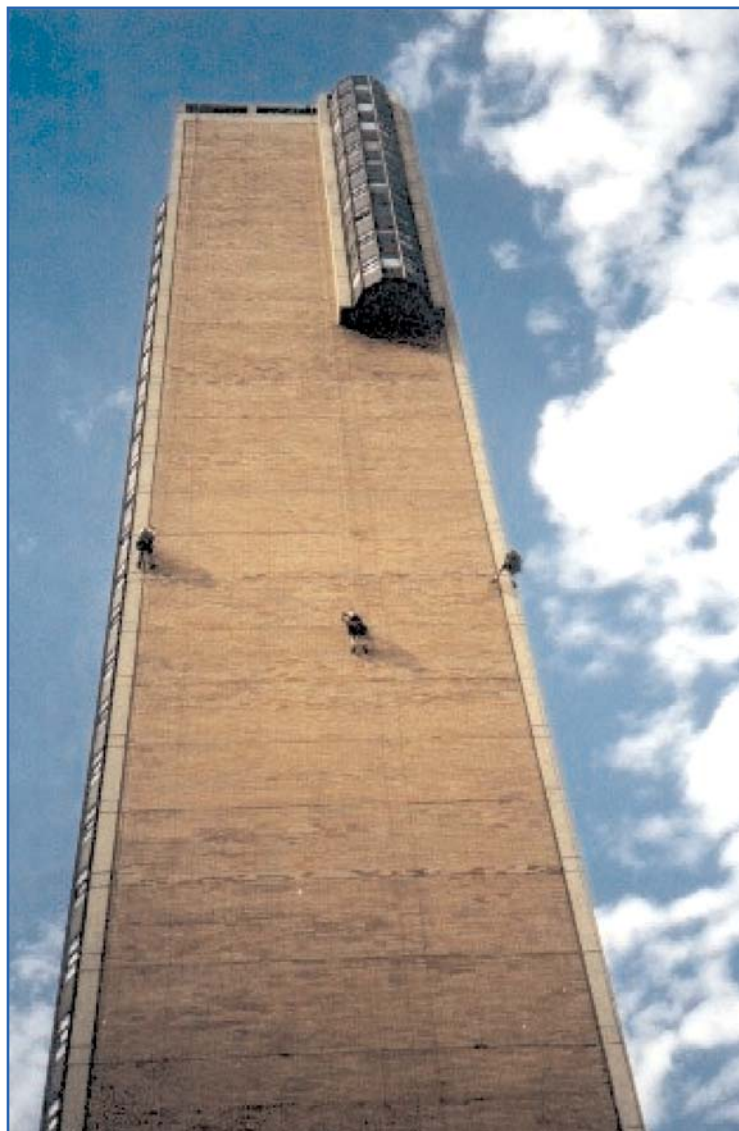
Periodic façade inspections are typically conducted in three steps.

- Step 1 involves reviewing the service history of the façade as typically documented in past reports or repair campaigns and possibly preparing elevation drawings if none already exists;
- Step 2 involves performing the inspection, which includes a visual survey under proper lighting conditions, a close-up inspection of select façade portions where the inspector can touch the building surface, and probing select façades to inspect for hidden deterioration; and
- Step 3 involves analyzing the findings of the inspection and preparing a report that is submitted to the building owner and local building authority.

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### **What Do Those Façade Inspectors Look For?**

Façade ordinances are typically thought of as safety inspections. In reality, the façade inspector cannot inspect for safety by looking for safe conditions. To inspect for safety, the façade inspector would have to essentially confirm the architectural design and structural engineering of the façade, which would require a tremendous amount of time and cost to building owners. Instead, inspectors are



*Figure 2 – Close-up inspection of a building façade using industrial rope access techniques.*

looking for unsafe conditions. These are typically factors that are not designed into the façade, such as cracks in materials, bulging in an otherwise flat wall, leaning of façade units or assemblies, and other anomalies that a keen, experienced façade inspector will notice (Figure 1).

Building owners can greatly assist the façade inspector by maintaining good documentation on the service history of the building façade. Previous periodic inspection reports should be easily accessible and contain good quality photographs of conditions found. The façade inspector will use the previous report for comparison to current conditions.

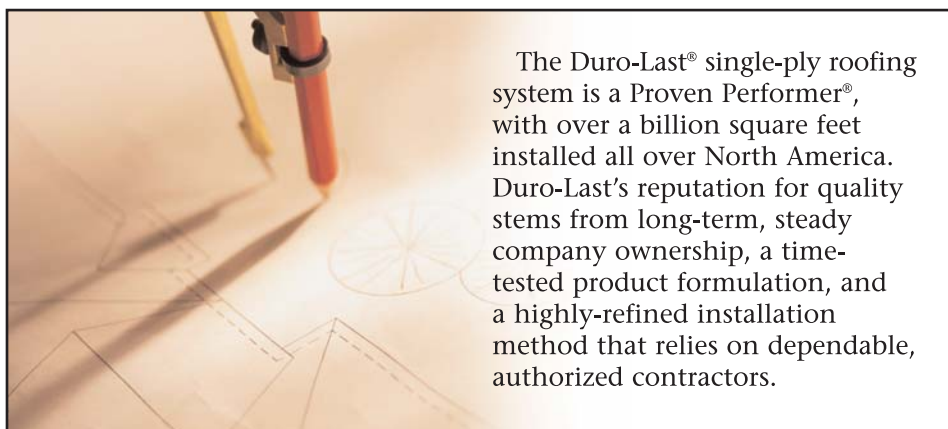
Prior to performing the close-up inspection, the inspector will perform a general visual survey of the façade, looking for anomalies (signs of deterioration). The visual survey is typically performed with the aid of binoculars. A telephoto camera is also used to photograph signs of deterioration, which can be cracks, water stains, spalls (sections where materials come apart), or displacement (typically outward shifting of a façade unit). The inspector needs to be knowledgeable of the exterior wall type to appreciate the potential causes of deterioration.

After performing a visual survey, the façade inspector will discern where close-up access is required to perform a detailed inspection that includes touching the façade surface and possibly probing the façade. Access for close-up inspection can be obtained from several methods, including an existing, permanent platform such as balconies or fire escapes; a temporary platform such as a contractor's scaffold; or through the use of mountain-climbing techniques (also known as industrial rope access, Figure 2).

If probing of the façade (cutting openings to look inside the wall) is required, several methods can be used. Methods for probing include insertion of a fiber-optic borescope (similar to medical borescopes), disassembly of façade components, or selectively cutting materials. In the case of historic buildings, extreme caution should be used in conducting probes to ensure that minimal to no damage is done to the historic façade (Figure 3).

After completing the façade inspection, the inspector prepares a report for the owner and for submission to the local building authority. Deteriorated conditions found by the inspector are classified into three categories – “unsafe conditions,”

Figure 3 – A fiber optic borescope is used to view inside a building façade. Borescopes require small holes in building façades in order to peek inside the wall system.



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## EXCERPTS FROM HAMMURABI'S CODE OF LAWS:


- 229 IF A BUILDER BUILD A HOUSE FOR SOMEONE, AND DOES NOT CONSTRUCT IT PROPERLY, AND THE HOUSE WHICH HE BUILT FALL IN AND KILL ITS OWNER, THEN THAT BUILDER SHALL BE PUT TO DEATH.
- 230 IF IT KILL THE SON OF THE OWNER, THE SON OF THAT BUILDER SHALL BE PUT TO DEATH.
- 231 IF IT KILL A SLAVE OF THE OWNER, THEN HE SHALL PAY SLAVE FOR SLAVE TO THE OWNER OF THE HOUSE.
- 232 IF IT RUIN GOODS, HE SHALL MAKE COMPENSATION FOR ALL THAT HAS BEEN RUINED, AND INASMUCH AS HE DID NOT CONSTRUCT PROPERLY THIS HOUSE WHICH HE BUILT AND IT FELL, HE SHALL RE-ERECT THE HOUSE FROM HIS OWN MEANS.
- 233 IF A BUILDER BUILD A HOUSE FOR SOMEONE, EVEN THOUGH HE HAS NOT YET COMPLETED IT; IF THEN THE WALLS SEEM TOPPLING, THE BUILDER MUST MAKE THE WALLS SOLID FROM HIS OWN MEANS.

“requires repair/stabilization,” and “ordinary maintenance.” Conditions classified as unsafe should be brought to the attention of the owner and local building authorities immediately, prior to preparing any written report. The owner will have to take immediate precautions to protect pedestrians and property from falling façade debris. Precautions owners usually take involve the erection of a protection scaffold, installation of temporary netting or straps to retain façade materials or components in place, or simply removing the unsafe condition.

Owners should understand that façade inspection reports are simply reports that classify deteriorated conditions. The façade inspection rarely includes the use of diagnostic tests to confirm the underlying cause of the observed deterioration. The deterioration may be part of a large systemic failure or may be independent of other symptoms. Further inspection, beyond the scope of inspecting for unsafe conditions, may be required and may include nondestructive testing of wall surfaces and laboratory testing of removed materials, which are typical

techniques used by façade consultants in diagnosing systemic failures and designing repairs for building façades.

### Only the Beginning

Façade inspection is currently part art and part science. Society has yet to develop a reliable test method for detecting unsafe conditions in building façades. There is plenty of work to do and, with the help of ASTM, further development of façade inspection tests, techniques, or procedures is promising. In the meantime, it should never be forgotten that the underlying purpose of the inspection is to avert needless injury or loss of life. 

### References

<sup>1</sup> Editor's note: This article was originally published in 2003. The then-proposed standard was later adopted as an active standard in 2005, superseding the 2003 historical standard of the same name.

### Michael Petermann

Michael Petermann is an architect and consultant at Wiss, Janney, Elstner Associates, Inc., in New York, New York. He has experience in the investigation and repair of both historic and contemporary building façades and roofs. In the past 15 years, he has surveyed numerous façades and roofs involving a wide variety of material and component failures. Along with Jeffrey Erdly, he has co-chaired the task group E06.55.05 on Façade Inspections.



### Jeffrey L. Erdly

Jeffrey L. Erdly is the president and co-founder of Masonry Preservation Services, Inc. (MPS), a specialty building façade repair contractor located in Berwick, Pennsylvania. A member of ASTM International since 1990, he is co-chairman of Task Group E06.55.05 for the Standard Practice for Periodic Inspection of Building Façades for Unsafe Conditions.



## BRONX COURTHOUSE IS GREEN

Tecta America recently completed installation of a 10,000-square-foot green roof of the Bronx County Building in the Bronx, NY. According to the borough president, it is the largest green roof in the Bronx, the first in New York City on a city-owned building, and one of the largest in the city. The roof was designed by Green Roof Service and will be maintained by Magco Inc.

The roof was funded by the Bronx Overall Economic Development Corporation as part of the Bronx Initiative for Energy and the Environment.

Due to courthouse security measures, the roof will not be open to the public, but because of its proximity to Yankee Stadium, it is expected that viewers will glimpse it during television coverage of the games.