

Philadelphia building collapse kills six

By Matthew MacEgan
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On Wednesday, June 5, a vacant four-story building being demolished on Market Street on the western edge of downtown Philadelphia collapsed, raining debris onto a neighboring Salvation Army thrift store and the surrounding pedestrian areas. Six people were killed, 14 others were trapped under the wreckage. For weeks, witnesses of the demolition practices had predicted the collapse.

The building once housed a first-floor sandwich shop and apartments above, but authorities report that the building housed a pornographic book and video shop. While the Salvation Army store sat upon one side of the wrecked building, the other side formerly saw another adult book store and Philadelphia's last remaining X-rated movie theater, both of which were also demolished during the last few months.

The property owner to which the demolition permit was issued, STB Investments Corp., is linked to prominent business man and developer Richard Basciano, who was formerly best known as a "porn king" in New York. The block and surrounding area have been targeted for extensive renovation plans including the introduction of several new retail stores and apartments.

At 10:45 a.m., bystanders reported hearing a thunderous boom that shook the ground and knocked pedestrians off of their feet. One person reported that he could hear screams coming from inside the Salvation Army building as an entire wall of debris and bricks plummeted down through the roof, destroying it. A man in his office across the street reported hearing "a rumbling, a very unusual sound." All he could see was a plume of dust rising from the debris when he reached his window. Others reported hearing two large bangs or explosions.

One woman was rescued from the rubble two hours after the destruction when rescuers heard her voice coming from within. The search for survivors

continued into the night, with rescuers using buckets and their bare hands to move bricks and other building materials. The last survivor, a 61-year-old woman, was pulled from the scene after 12 long hours trapped under the wreckage. She was reportedly able to squeeze one of the rescuing hands as they were digging before she was rushed to a nearby hospital. Officials from the Department of Labor and Occupational Safety and Health Administration were also on the scene.

While the names of the victims have not yet been released, authorities stated that five men and one 35-year-old woman were killed. Survivors were taken to hospitals with mostly minor injuries. Five were treated and released by Wednesday evening. Police used the nearby Mutter Museum, a popular tourist attraction that houses medical oddities, as a staging area for the rescue operation.

Witnesses had been watching the site for weeks, questioning the methods being used by the demolition team. Patrick Glynn, a roofer, told reporters that he had felt that a collapse was inevitable. "For weeks they've been standing on the edge, knocking bricks off," he reported. "You could just see it was ready to go at any time." Glynn and his coworker were among the first responders to the scene, helping to pull out three survivors from the rubble. A window washer, Steve Cramer, working across the street for several days, claimed that the demolition crew had left 30 feet of a dividing wall standing without any kind of support or braces, compromising the integrity of the building.

Evidence that has emerged from the scene strongly suggests that the cause of the tragedy is due to cost-cutting by the building's owner, who hired a third-rate contractor that recklessly dug into the building. The city, which granted the permits for the demolition and made no effort to monitor the methods being used, is also to blame.

Stephen Estrin, a Florida contractor who has testified

as an expert at several trials involving building collapses, told the Associated Press that the demolition of an inner-city masonry building such as this “would normally be done manually because of the inherent risk—predictable if things are not done very slowly and very carefully—of a collapse.”

Estrin pointed out the fact that a claw device was reported on the scene, noting, “One of the problems with claw work is it sets up a vibration in the walls.” A construction worker across the street reported that he saw a crane remove a supporting beam from the front of the building just as the wall gave way. Another witness stated that a backhoe hit the rear side of the building at about the same time.

Police have described the collapse as an “industrial accident,” and the Occupational Safety and Health Administration has also referred to the scene as an accident. The building had no existing violations, and Campbell Construction, which was handling the demolition, had permits for the work it was doing. “No violations, no complaints that we’re aware of, and all permits were valid,” Philadelphia mayor Michael Nutter told reporters Thursday.

However, demolition firm owner Griffin Campbell does not have a clean record. Evidence has surfaced of Campbell’s many legal and financial troubles. He was charged in 2005 with dealing crack cocaine near a playground. Reportedly, that charge was dismissed after prosecutors misplaced the evidence. In 2009, he pleaded guilty to insurance fraud, and in 2007, he was acquitted of aggravated assault and related offenses. He also filed for bankruptcy protection twice in 2010, the first of which was dismissed after he failed to follow through on a repayment plan.

Building owner Richard Basciano was an associate and friend and one-time estate executor of slumlord Sam Rappaport. Following Rappaport’s lead, Basciano bought up several buildings on Market Street, investing nothing and waiting for a big payday. A reply to a local online news source reads: “Basciano is a piece of garbage.”

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