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Expert: Fireproofing At WTC Was Inadequate

By Graham Rayman
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Fireproofing on floor supports and columns in the World Trade Center was inadequate, a structural expert said yesterday, adding a new wrinkle to the debate over the causes of the towers' collapse.

Nine photos taken in the early 1990s by architect Roger Morse were presented yesterday during a forum at New York University.

"What I saw was that the fireproofing up to the 40th floor was deficient, and I don't have any reason to believe it would be different in the rest of the building," Morse said in a phone interview.

Since Sept. 11, experts have concluded that the towers' steel was exposed to the intense fire because the impact of the hijacked planes sheared away fireproofing.

Frank Lombardi, chief engineer of the Port Authority, which built the Twin Towers, said the enormous impacts make the fireproofing discussion moot.

"Even if we had double or triple the fireproofing, as soon as the aircrafts hit, the material would have failed," he said.

But Morse countered, "Doubtless the impact blew off some of the fireproofing. Whether it blew it all off is another question."

The photos, taken in the north tower between 1990 and 1993, show exposed steel and what appears to be spotty fireproofing on floor joists, connections between the floors and the exterior columns, and on core columns.

It is not clear, however, whether those areas shown were subsequently improved by the Port Authority. The agency spent millions on replacing asbestos-based fireproofing over the decades.

"The photos indicate a need for further study of the fireproofing in the towers," said Frederick Mowrer, a University of Maryland engineering professor who presented Morse's pictures.

Morse said he took the photos as an expert witness hired by a company involved in a suit filed by the Port Authority. He said he recently provided the photos to Mowrer because, "There's a trust that exists between a builder, the occupants and the firefighter. In this particular instance that trust was broken. Still, there is a lot of investigative work that needs to be done."

Mowrer and James Quintiere, a University of Maryland colleague, also opined that much of the jet fuel blew out of the buildings and burned off quickly. This view suggests the fuel may not have had as large a role in the collapses as initially thought.

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