On November 9, 1983, quiet of the early morning hours would be shattered in the Grammercy Park area of Manhattan. Units would be challenged by a fire in a renovated multiple dwelling that almost claimed the lives of two firefighters.
THE BUILDING

The fire building at 321 East 22nd Street was a renovated multiple dwelling. It was a series of six, 5-story buildings built in the 1800s. They were former commercial buildings. In 1972, these six building underwent a major renovation. A new façade was installed. The rear walls of each of these buildings were removed and the depth of the buildings were either extended or shortened to become uniform in length. The brick bearing walls that separated the former buildings were removed. In their place, walls built with 4”x 4” wood studs were installed. These walls were not in line with the former masonry bearing walls. These walls were located as the apartment designs dictated. All the former building’s stairways were removed and replaced with one center hall stairway which divided the building, front half and back half. This design created 70 foot dead-end hallways. The renovation also included the addition of a 6th floor to the building. This 6th floor also had a mezzanine which made the building essentially a 7-story building. The sloping roof for the mezzanine was not visible from the street. It was only visible from the rear.

Inside the renovated building, the ceilings were lowered. The center hall, which was constructed out of concrete block, separated the front and rear apartments. This essentially created two 4,500 square foot cocklofts on each floor, one on each side of the hallway. Utility shafts that connected plumbing and electric, opened into these combustible voids. These utility shafts had no fire
stopping. The horizontal voids were interconnected with the vertical voids. These voids were framed out with wood studs.

There were no sprinkler systems in the renovated building. The building therefore was equipped with fire escapes that went the length of the building. This arrangement looked similar to party-wall balconies but with only one ladder for the entire length of the fire escape. The fire escape balconies were 150 feet long, the length of the building. The newly renovated building now contained 116 apartments.

**The Fire**

At 0525 hours, the Manhattan Fire Dispatcher received a telephone call reporting a fire in apartment 2H on the second floor of 321 E. 22nd Street. Manhattan Box 608 was transmitted sending Engines 16, 5, Ladders 7, 3, and Battalion 6 to the scene. In quick succession, other phone calls were received reporting a fire in apartment 3W and apartment 1A. At 0528 hours, Capt. John Tobin of Engine 16 arrived. There was no fire or smoke visible from the exterior. Upon entry into the first floor, a light haze and a slight smell of burning wood could be sensed. Capt. Tobin transmitted a 10-75. Engine 14 was sent with the transmission of the 10-75.
Engine 16 stretched an 1 ¾ inch hand line to the first floor and operated in apartment 1U on the 1st floor. Ladder 7 and Ladder 3 went to the first floor as well. The fire appeared to be a small fire around an electrical outlet. While an examination was being made, Lieut. Peter Hayden of Ladder 3 noticed fire coming from the floor/carpeting in the apartment. Ladder 3 went to determine the limits of fire extension. They found fire extending toward the exposure 4 side of the building.

Working in Battalion 6 for the tour was Battalion Chief Michael Scirica. Battalion 6 arrived at 0529 hours as Engine 16 was stretching the first hand line. B.C. Scirica had Ladder 7 open up the ceiling in the rear apartment. Fire was spotted extending toward the floor above. B.C. Scirica determined the fire condition as a light fire condition. As Ladder 7 continued to open up the ceilings, it became apparent that the fire was more advanced than originally thought. Everywhere that hooks were put into the ceiling, showed fire.

At 0537 hours, Battalion 6 requested and additional Engine and Truck. Engine 21 and Ladder 9 were dispatched. At 0540 hours, Battalion Chief Scirica of Battalion 6 transmitted the “All-Hands” for box 608. Battalion 4, Rescue 1, and Division 1 were dispatched as well.

Ladder 3, commanded by Lieut. Peter Hayden, went to the floor above for vent, entry and search (VES). While operating in apartment 2A, they discovered fire extending into the apartment via the utility shaft. Ladder 3 opened up behind a bathroom mirror and found heavy fire behind it. Lieut. Hayden radioed a report to B.C. Scirica telling him of the volume of fire that was in the voids and to transmit a second alarm. At 0542 hours, a full 2nd Alarm was transmitted. Engines 33, 28, 1, Ladders 11, Engine 9/Satellite 1 were sent.

Deputy Chief Gene Dockter of the 1st Division arrived at 0548 hours and assumed command of the fire. After a quick size-up of conditions, he requested the response of two additional ladder companies. Ladders 24 and 12 were sent to the scene. Deputy Chief Dockter spotted the voids within the renovated building and knew that the fire was probably well advanced.
The fire was racing within the voids of this renovated building. The wood used to lower the ceilings on each floor created a highway for the fire. The utility shafts were not fire stopped. Fire quickly found these vertical voids and extended upward. The fire was kept to the rear of the building with the hallway acting as a fire wall.

The heavy fire in the voids was beginning to erupt. Engine 5 commanded by Capt. Jack Boyle stretched an 1 ¾ inch hand line to the second floor. Engine 14 commanded by Lieut. Eugene Flynn also stretched an 1 ¾ inch hand line to the second floor. Engine 21 arrived commanded by Lieut. DiPietro and were ordered to stretch a hand line to the third floor.

Fire was now starting to show out multiple windows in the rear of the building. A heavy smoke condition filled the entire building. They moved to the 3rd floor, extinguished fire, and then moved to the 4th floor. Ladder 3 and Engine 5 at one point were forced out onto the rear fire escape balcony. They found themselves in a precarious position with fire coming out windows below them. The one fire escape ladder was a distance from them. Engine 5 and Ladder 3 were cut off. Capt. Jack Boyle of Engine 5 made a memorable radio transmission: “Better get a line back here, we are barbequing like 5 Franks on a grill.”

Ladder 9 commanded by Lieut. William Gray arrived at the fire. They were ordered to check the second floor along with Ladder 3. In seeing that there was fire on the second floor, they proceeded to the third floor to perform VES and check for extension. There was fire on the third floor also. A hose line was called
for and was stretched by Engine 1 via a fire escape stretch. Engine 1 was commanded by Lieut. Richard Judson.

Engine 33 was assigned first due on the 2nd alarm commanded by Lieut. James McDermott. They were ordered to stretch a hand line to the rear fire escape. Fr. John Rack from Ladder 9 was detailed to Engine 33 for the tour. He was sent back to Engine 33’s pumper to obtain rolled-up lengths of hose so they could stretch to the upper floors. Upon his return to the rear of the building, he saw that there was a 35 foot portable ladder placed from the roof of a one-story set back to the third floor balcony of the fire escape. There was a gap between the fire building and this one-story extension. Fr. Rack started to climb the portable ladder with the hose to the third floor fire escape balcony. He handed the hose to Fr. John Thompson of Engine 33. He began his descent of the ladder to obtain the remaining lengths of hose. The ladder was not supported at the tip or the base. As he was climbing down the ladder, the portable ladder started to slide. Realizing that the portable ladder was going to fall, Fr. Rack jumped toward
the roof set-back. He fell 21 feet and fractured one of his ankles. If he had not made it to the roof and fell to the ground, he would have fallen 40 feet. The first Firefighter to reach Fr. Rack was Fr. Angelo Figueroa of Ladder 9. He was later joined by other firefighters in assisting in removing Fr. Rack to the ambulance.

Second alarm units were now arriving at the fire. Engine 28 commanded by Lieut. Andy Trabanco was ordered to stretch a hand line to the top floor. Lieut. Trabanco ordered his members to stretch a 2½ inch hand line. Working in Engine 28 was Fr. Bob Daly, Fr. Patrick McDade, Fr. Bob Kuehlewein, Fr. Frank Morrisano, and Fr. John Boyer. Engine 28 utilized a rope stretch to accomplish their task.

Ladder 11 arrived at the fire. Working in Ladder 11 was Lieut. Jerry Kelly, Fr. Fred Schwarzrock, Fr. John Salka, Fr. Billy Beyer, Fr. Paul Casey, and Fr. Mike Peterson. Deputy Chief Dockter ordered them to operate on the top floor for VES.

Fire was erupting in the building in the rear apartments. Deputy Chief Dockter transmitted a 3rd alarm at 0600 hours. Fire was now coming out windows
in the rear of the building on several floors. The front of the building looked completely different from the rear of the building. The concrete block hallway kept all the fire in the rear of the building. Setting up a Tower Ladder stream in the front of the building was not an option. It would have been ineffective because all the fire was in the rear of the building. At one point, Battalion Chief James Manahan of the Safety Battalion radioed Deputy Chief Dockter and told him that he needs two hand lines, two ladder companies and a Battalion Chief on every floor. Units were being assigned as soon as they arrived. Deputy Chief Dockter transmitted a 4th alarm at 0625 hours.

As Engine 28 brought their 2 ½ inch hose line to the 6th floor, the smoke condition throughout the building was heavy. Lieut. Trabanco, Fr. Kuehlewein, Fr. Morrisano, Fr. Daly and Fr. McDade started operating their hose line on the 6th floor. While Engine 28 was operating and extinguishing fire, a trapped woman was discovered. She was removed to the front of the building by Fr. Daly and Fr. McDade, and she was removed by Tower Ladder 7’s bucket. Lieut. Trabanco was awaiting the return of Fr. Daly and Fr. McDade to the hose line. They did not return. They became disoriented in the heavy smoke and went to the 7th floor/mezzanine floor. Lieut. Trabanco became concerned. Lieut. Trabanco radioed to Deputy Chief Dockter that he had two members missing as he commenced a search for the two missing members. Battalion Chief Arthur Meadows of the 4th Battalion fought his way up the stairs through the heat and smoke and told Lieut. Trabanco that he was there to help him find his missing members.
Ladder 11 was performing primary searches on the top (7th) floor. (*The top floor was a mezzanine that had an entrance off the hallway.*) They divided into two teams. Lieut. Kelly, Fr. Schwarzrock, and Fr. Salka comprised one team. Fr. Beyer, Fr. Peterson, and Fr. Casey comprised the second team. All the apartment doors were locked and blocked with furniture making forcible entry and arduous task. (*Unbeknownst to the operating Firefighters, the 7th floor doors were not used by the occupants. They used the doors on the 6th floor for entry into their apartments. These 7th floor doors were locked and blocked with furniture.*) Upon forcing entry to apartment 6K, Ladder 11 found two trapped occupants, Diane Steen and Peter Steen. Lieut. Kelly took Diane Steen to the public hallway toward the scuttle ladder that lead to the roof. Lieut. Kelly was sharing his mask facepiece with Ms. Steen as the smoke condition was debilitating. She was removed to the roof via a scuttle ladder at the end of the public hallway. Fr. Schwarzrock grabbed Mr. Steen and took him out to the hallway. Mr. Steen was in a state of panic as Fr. Schwarzrock was sharing his facepiece with the trapped civilian. Lieut. Kelly helped Fr. Schwarzrock in bringing Mr. Steen up the scuttle ladder to the roof. The two missing members of Engine 28 were found near the scuttle ladder. They assisted Lieut. Kelly with Mr. and Ms. Steen. Fr. McDade and Fr. Daly of Engine 28 followed Lieut. Kelly down to the top floor. Lieut. Trabanco of Engine 28 and the rest of his unit found Fr. McDade and Fr. Daly on the top floor.
The Rescue of Diane Steen and Peter Steen captured by Daily News’ photographer Dan Godfrey
Fr. Salka and Fr. Schwarzrock from Ladder 11 continued to perform a search in these difficult conditions. They were in the process of forcing another apartment door to seek refuge from the heavy smoke condition. Fr. Schwarzrock was out of air and he was beginning to feel the effects of smoke inhalation. He started to lose control of his body. His head made contact with Fr. Salka’s. He said: “Sammy, you gotta get me into an apartment.” (“Sammy” was Fr. Salka’s nickname in Ladder 11.) Fr. Schwarzrock then fell to the floor, unconscious. Fr. Salka took his mask facepiece off and began mask sharing with Fr. Schwarzrock. Fr. Salka began calling out for help. Fr. Salka’s body was beginning to feel the effects of carbon monoxide poisoning while he gave his mask facepiece to Fr. Schwarzrock. (Historical Note: In 1983, the Forcible Entry Firefighter and the Can Firefighter did not have handi-talkies.) Lieut. Kelly was making his way back toward the other members of his team when he heard Fr. Salka’s calls for help. He told him to keep calling out so they could be found. Lieut. Kelly found Fr. Salka semi-conscious and Fr. Schwarzrock unconscious. The smoke condition was acrid.

Lieut. Kelly of Ladder 11 took his mask facepiece off and started mask sharing with Fr. Salka. Fr. McDade and Fr. Daly of Engine 28 made their way to the two endangered Firefighters who were 30-35 feet away. Lieut. Kelly ordered them to drag Fr. Schwarzrock to the only sure exit he knew of, the scuttle ladder to the roof. Lieut. Kelly assisted Fr. Salka to the scuttle ladder.
He assisted him up the ladder and to the roof. At this time, Lieut. Kelly transmitted a “MAYDAY” message. He reported to Deputy Chief Dockter that they have an unconscious firefighter and they needed a resuscitator on the roof. As Fr. Schwarzrock was unconscious, he could not be assisted onto the scuttle ladder. A rope was called for to be dropped from the roof. The rope was tied around the chest of Fr. Schwarzrock and Firefighters on the roof hoisted Fr. Schwarzrock to the roof.

When Fr. Fred Schwarzrock was hoisted to the roof, he had a weak pulse and shallow breathing. The resuscitator was applied to him. By now, fire was breaking through the roof. In front of the building, Deputy Chief Dockter requested EMS personnel go to the roof. EMS Specialist Kevin Finn was hoisted to
the roof via Tower Ladder 7’s bucket with his equipment, which was operated by Fr. Richard Schultz of Ladder 9. A stokes basket stretcher was brought to the roof and Fr. Schwarzrock was placed in the stretcher. He was removed to the street via Tower Ladder 7’s bucket. He was removed to Bellevue Hospital where he was admitted for smoke inhalation and a fractured vertebrae. Fr. Salka was also admitted with smoke inhalation. The time was approximately 0640 hours.
The other team from Ladder 11 was performing primary searches in other top floor apartments. Their air supply was becoming depleted. In the heavy smoke condition, Fr. Peterson and Fr. Casey made their way to the roof. Fr. Billy Beyer continued to search on the top floor. Fr. Beyer ran out of air and he made his way to the rear fire escape on the 6th floor. Fr. Beyer’s escape from the top floor put him in another dangerous situation. He was trapped on the top floor fire escape balcony with another Firefighter, Angel Vasquez from Ladder 9. Fire was coming up through the fire escape balcony. They called for a life-saving rope to be dropped down to them from the roof. Ladder 3’s life-saving rope was dropped to them by Fr. Richard Schultz of Ladder 9. They tied the rope off to a substantial object. Fr. Beyer and Fr. Vasquez performed a single slide evolution and rappelled down to the rear yard to escape their predicament. Once down on the ground, Fr. Beyer notified Lieut. Kelly of his location.

Available units were quickly being used up. The fire was racing throughout the building with fire on every floor of this occupied building. There was heavy fire in the cockloft and fire was coming through the roof where ventilation holes were cut. Deputy Chief Dockter transmitted a 5th alarm at 0702 hours.
The fire required 18 hose lines to eventually extinguish the fire. The fire was placed “Probably Will Hold” at 0817 hours and “Under Control” at 0824 hours. There were 29 apartments involved in fire, all of which were in the rear of the building. There were 26 Firefighters injured at this fire and two civilians were treated for smoke inhalation (Mr. and Ms. Steen). Fr. Fred Schwarzrock remained in Bellevue Hospital for 15 days. He had 29%-31% carboxyhemoglobin in his blood when he was admitted.

The Board of Merit met and considered the actions taken at this fire. Fr. John Salka L-11, Lieut. Jerry Kelly L-11, Fr. Fred Schwarzrock L-11, Fr. Michael Joyce L-3, Fr. Reid Jantz L-3, Lieut. Robert Crozier L-9 and Fr. Peter Guidetti E-33 were awarded “Class A awards” for their actions at Manhattan Box 5-5-608. (A “Class A award” is awarded for an act that requires personal bravery in conjunction with initiative and capability.) Fr. John Salka received the “Fire Bell Club Medal” on Medal Day 1984 for his actions in saving the life of Fr. Fred Schwarzrock. EMS Specialist Kevin Finn was awarded the “Life Saving Medal”, the second highest award presented by the NYC Health and Hospitals Corporation. (Historical Note: The NYC Health and Hospitals Corporation was the agency that administered the Emergency Medical Service prior to the merger with the New York City Fire Department (FDNY) in 1994.)
Voids are inherent in wood frame buildings and brick and wood joist construction. Generally speaking, when a building is renovated, these voids become larger and new voids are created.

The new voids in renovated buildings may be interconnected with other voids and are probably not fire stopped. Fire stopping, if present, may be compromised when plumbing and/or electric lines are installed.

If the building is sprinklered, and fire breaks out within a void, the sprinkler system would be ineffective.

Lowering the height of a ceiling of an older building during renovation is a common practice. This reduces the
area that must be heated and cooled. It also allows an area where electrical lines, ducts and plumbing can be installed.

“The generation of carbon monoxide in concealed places can be as much as 50 times greater than what it would be in the open. The carbon monoxide flammability range is from 12.5 to 74%. Its ignition temperature is 1128°F.” Building Construction for the Fire Service 3rd ed., Brannigan, pp. 189

Once fire reaches the voids, it is difficult to put out. Water must be applied to the fuel to accomplish extinguishment. Heavy emphasis must be placed on pulling walls and ceilings to expose the hidden fire. Use of the “cockloft nozzle” could knock down a tremendous amount of fire and allow us to gain control of the expanding fire.

When a building is renovated, almost always wood lath and plaster walls are replaced with gypsum board (sheetrock). Sheetrock is “the only construction material that does not yield heat when burned in pure oxygen.” However, sheetrock is a one-use building material. Once it is exposed to the heat of a fire, it begins to lose its moisture and starts to deteriorate. This deterioration is irreversible. Brannigan, 3rd ed. Pp. 223

When fire penetrates sheetrock, the fire progresses from a contents fire to a structural fire. The fire can penetrate the sheetrock by as little as a pinhole. Once fire gets behind the sheetrock, the voids are in immediate danger.

Generally speaking, renovations to existing buildings are bad for the fire service. Unless the renovation is the installation of a sprinkler system, you would do well to consider that the renovation has made our job as firefighters more difficult.
Once fire reaches the combustible voids, it is vital to get ahead of the fire. Find the location of the vertical voids and try to vent over that void to prevent horizontal extension. Hose lines must be stretched to the fire-involved void and apply water into it as quickly as possible.

When fires start in the voids, it frequently goes undetected by the occupants and leads to a delayed alarm. This was the case at the fire on 321 E. 22nd St. These voids are frequently constructed out of wood and are filled with electrical wires. They are highly combustible. If the void is made of non-combustible material, there is still a fire threat from the electrical wires, communication wires, plastic pipes, and foam insulation.

Some landmark fires that have started in concealed spaces are:

- The MGM Grand Hotel Fire in Las Vegas in 1980, took the lives of 85 people.
- The Beverly Hills Supper Club Fire in Southgate, Kentucky in 1977, and took the lives of 165 people.
- The fire that occurred in One New York Plaza in 1970 in Manhattan, the non-combustible ceiling plenum voids were responsible for the horizontal movement of fire. This fire took the lives of 3 people and was instrumental in the passage of Local Law 5 which improved fire protection and life safety in high rise buildings.
THE ENGINE 28/LADDER 11 - 18TH BATTALION CONNECTION

Two of the Firefighters mentioned in this essay from Ladder 11, John Salka and Billy Beyer, reconnected later in their careers. They were both assigned to the 18th Battalion as Battalion Chiefs. In addition, Battalion Chiefs Billy Oehm and Kevin Loughran of the 18th Battalion were also alumni of Engine 28/Ladder 11. All four Battalion Chiefs retired out of the 18th Battalion.


Thanks to the following people who contributed to this essay: Deputy Chief Eugene Dockter (Ret.), Chief of Department Peter Hayden (Ret.), Captain Andy Trabanco (Ret.), Deputy Chief Vincent Dunn (Ret.), Leslie Ifill (Fire Records Unit), Katy Clements (Photo Unit), Battalion Chief John Salka (Ret.), Lieutenant Fred Schwarzrock (Ret.), Battalion Chief Billy Beyer (Ret.), Fr. Chris Roberto

Deputy Chief Jay Jonas, Division 7