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“The problem of aging infrastructure is not limited to Quebec, and the loss of life there should rouse all of the country to action.”

“If we continue to do things the same way that we have been doing it, we are going to get close to the end of life of many infrastructure systems in 10 or 15 years. This is when the crisis will happen.”

Dr. Guy Felio, Adjunct professor of Engineering, Carleton University, Ottawa.

Concerns mount as Montreal crumbles

STRUCTURAL DEFICIT

GRAEME HAMILTON
in Montreal

When Montrealers look to the skies these days, it is not just to gauge the weather. The recent death of a woman struck by concrete that broke off from a downtown high-rise — and the hospitalization of a construction worker this week knocked unconscious by concrete crumbling from a dilapidated overpass — have accentuated fears that the city's infrastructure is a public menace.

A lawyer friend described this week changing tables on a patio outside the Place Ville Marie office tower after realizing he was seated beneath a concrete overhang. A regular commuter talked of hitting the gas beneath certain overpasses to reduce his possible exposure to falling debris.

In a discussion forum on the popular Fodor's travel website, usually a source of advice on restaurants and attractions, someone planning a family vacation in Montreal this month recently asked for an update about "parts of buildings falling into the streets."

Saeed Mirza, professor emeritus of civil engineering at Montreal's McGill University, has been trying to sound the alarm for years. He believes a combination of shoddy construction standards during the city's 1960s building boom and inadequate maintenance have created a dangerous situation that he likens to a tumour.

"If you ignore it, as we have done in Quebec, it just grows like that cancer," he said in an interview this week. "Then comes the stage when the cancer has spread so much, it is fatal. It's exactly the same with our infrastructure. If we go on being negligent, there will be so much deterioration that we cannot fix it. In fixing it, pieces of concrete the size of a football are falling on a poor worker's head."

Experts point out that the chances of actually being struck by falling concrete remain infinitesimal; there is a far greater risk of dying in a car crash. And Quebec is not the only North American jurisdiction that has seen tragedies and near misses. Two years ago, 13 people were killed when a bridge in Minneapolis collapsed

into the Mississippi River. In 2006, a three-tonne ceiling panel fell from a recently built Boston tunnel, killing a car passenger. In 2007, a 140-kilogram marble tile fell from the 60th floor of Toronto's First Canadian Place, but nobody was hurt.

Still, the province's record seems particularly grim. Skittishness about the state of infrastructure goes back at least as far as 1991, when a 55-tonne concrete beam from the Olympic Stadium crashed onto a walkway. Nobody was injured, but baseball's Expos had to play their last 13 home games on the road that year.

In 2000, one man was killed when an overpass under construction in the Montreal suburb of Laval fell onto the highway below. A coroner's report found that beams had not been properly installed. Six years

later, but the library has been forced to install a barrier around the building to protect people from falling glass. Last November, a parking garage built in 1970 collapsed in north-end Montreal, killing one man trapped in his car. Then two weeks ago, Léa Guilbeault, 33, was killed in front of her husband as they sat at a glassed-in sushi restaurant on Peel St. in downtown Montreal. A concrete slab fell off the facade of the 42-year-old Marriott hotel building above, plunging 18 storeys and killing Ms. Guilbeault instantly.

Mr. Mirza said many of the structures at fault date back to the 1960s and early '70s, when the Montreal region was experiencing an Expo '67-triggered construction boom. "There was such a rush to build things that quality control wasn't there in design and construction," he said. Ms. Guilbeault's death points to the need for mandatory inspections of privately owned buildings, he said.

Guy Saint-Pierre, a former chief executive of the Quebec engineering firm SNC-Lavalin, accused Parti Québécois governments of neglecting the maintenance of infrastructure because they were focussed on other political goals. (He was a provincial Liberal minister in the 1970s.) But he added that the thirst for costly social programs in Quebec is also to blame for the crumbling infrastructure. He cited university education and health care as areas where Quebecers "have a much better deal than elsewhere." Compromises are required, and infrastructure has been sacrificed. "It's very difficult for the roads and the bridges to have a mass meeting to say, 'Hey, look after us a little bit better: It's easier for people who want something else,'" Mr. Saint-Pierre said.

Guy Felio, an adjunct professor of engineering at Carleton University, said the problem of aging infrastructure is not limited to Quebec, and the loss of life there should rouse all of the country to action.

"If we continue doing things the same way that we have been doing it, we are going to get close to the end of life of many infrastructure systems in 10 or 15 years," he said. "This is when the crisis is going to happen."

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There was such a rush ... that quality control wasn't there

later, the de la Concorde overpass in Laval, built in the early 1970s, collapsed, claiming five lives.

Laval's mayor admitted at the time that driving the highway to Montreal made him nervous.

"Every time I drove downtown, when the traffic was stopping, I made sure I wasn't stopping my car under a bridge," Gilles Vaillancourt said in a CTV report.

A commission of inquiry blamed the de la Concorde collapse on shoddy construction and ineffective maintenance and noted that Quebec lagged behind the rest of North America in maintaining its bridges and overpasses. The 2007 report found that 46% of the province's bridges needed repair or replacement within five years, compared with 12% in the United States and 32% in Ontario.

The Grande Bibliothèque in Montreal, opened in 2005, has seen more than a dozen glass panels fall from its facade and shatter. Nobody has been