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Why New York City Can't Fix Its Ugly Scaffolding Problem

Thanks to archaic laws, the Big Apple is filled with sidewalk sheds that stay for years

By *Erin Ailworth* [Follow](#) | *Photographs and video by Jonah Markowitz for The Wall Street Journal*

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NEW YORK—Anne “LaVerne” Gaither teared up when workers dismantled the hunter-green plywood and metal scaffolding that for 21 years obscured the entrance of her Harlem apartment building.

The 220-foot-long structure, known here as a sidewalk shed, was New York City’s oldest existing shed until it came down in December. It was originally built in 2002 to protect pedestrians during required repairs to the neo-Georgian facade of 409 Edgecombe Ave., a century-old landmark once home to luminaries such as W.E.B. DuBois and Thurgood Marshall.

Gaither, 93 years old, used to keep bottles of water for the workers on the wooden platform outside her second-story window. “My tears were thanks for being alive to see it come down,” she said.

A few weeks later, damage caused by a deadly fire forced the rise of a new shed.

The building’s shed saga is an extreme example of the staying power of New York City’s scaffolding, whose ubiquity spurred some to joke that it is the Big Apple’s official tree. More than 8,300 sidewalk sheds currently enshroud some 360 miles of the city’s sidewalks, according to permit data from the New York City Department of Buildings. (Those numbers encompass active permits without taking into account whether a property owner changed vendors or briefly removed, and then replaced, scaffolding under a new permit.) Around 300 of those sheds are more than five years old.

The buildup is the result of a cocktail of issues, including insufficient oversight by regulators; supply bottlenecks, particularly for specialty items needed by landmark

buildings; and financial struggles at low-income buildings.

Perhaps the biggest factor, say many officials—including Mayor Eric Adams—is the set of arcane local rules requiring sidewalk sheds for pedestrian protection during construction and demolition, facade work, and other exterior maintenance. The laws stem from the death of a Barnard College student killed by a falling piece of masonry in 1979.

The rules, particularly those governing facade inspections and repairs, encourage property owners to leave sheds up instead of completing critical and often costly work, the Adams administration said.

With all possible fines levied, it can cost about \$100,000 a year to install and maintain a shed. Facade repairs, meanwhile, can cost millions.

“Too many sheds have become permanent fixtures of our landscape,” Adams said in December, while celebrating the removal of the 21-year-old shed at 409 Edgecombe.



Anne 'LaVerne' Gaither of 409 Edgecombe Ave.

Nikki Berryman, president of 409 Edgecombe’s board, said a lightning strike that hit the building during superstorm Sandy, just as workers finished more than \$1 million in repairs, extended the shed’s presence. Raising money for the new repairs took the low-income co-op a lot of time, as did replacing terracotta elements with fiberglass.

“It was very daunting,” Berryman said.

According to city data, roughly 40% of sheds proliferate when a facade inspection—required every five years for buildings higher than six stories—finds unsafe conditions needing repair. New construction, major alterations and demolition, as well as maintenance on smaller buildings, account for the other 60%.

Critics say the facade inspection and safety rules are well-meaning, but crafted in a rigid way that is out of step with how buildings age. Newer glass and steel skyscrapers are treated the same way as decades-old brick and terracotta buildings, for instance.

Property owners are also required to erect sidewalk sheds to protect walkways within a distance of half the height of the building. In a city full of skyscrapers, that has led to sheds in some nonsensical places just to comply with the letter of the law, said Stephen Smith, executive director of the Center for Building in North America, a nonprofit that does research on building codes and construction policies.

“This isn’t how things fall in real life—this is not how gravity works,” Smith said.

“Obviously, what’s going on here is the city is on a hair trigger when it comes to ordering these things to be put up.”



Scaffolding covers a building entrance in Harlem.

A 2021 audit of New York City sidewalk sheds by the state comptroller found the city’s Department of Buildings “needs to be more proactive in ensuring that owners and other responsible parties comply with relevant codes, laws, and rules pertaining to the timely permitting, installation, maintenance, and removal of sheds.” A 2023 follow-up found the city had made limited progress implementing the audit’s recommendations, a notion the city disagrees with.

Meera Joshi, the deputy mayor for operations, said Adams is working on reforms, such as speeding up the process for the city to take on capital projects. The city of New York, itself a large property owner, struggles with lingering sheds when its own buildings need facade work.

“We know we will never get rid of scaffolding,” she said. “We’ll do everything we can do to minimize it.”

The Department of Buildings recently has stepped up its efforts to take building owners to court over longstanding sheds.

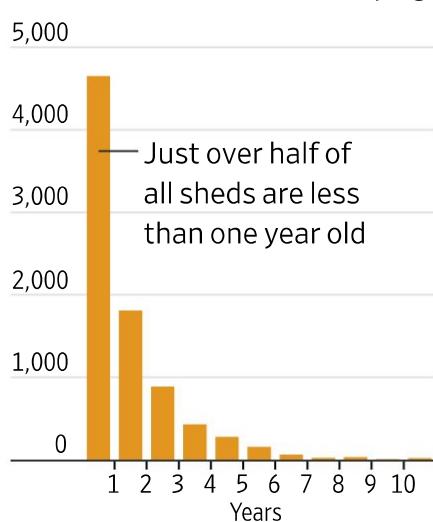
The scaffolding scourge is worst in Manhattan, where it is almost impossible to walk any distance without encountering one of the borough’s roughly 3,800 sidewalk sheds, including those along famed thoroughfares such as Broadway and Fifth Avenue.

Number of scaffold sheds in New York City

By block group, as of Feb. 13



Number of scaffold sheds by age



Source: New York City Department of Buildings
Max Rust/THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

Manhattan Borough President Mark Levine, who recently called out some of the oldest sheds with mock awards, wants the city to lengthen the timespan between required facade inspections in some cases and provide low-interest loans for financially strapped buildings, among other reforms. Adams said he generally agrees with the ideas.

Levine said the scope of the problem was apparent in April 2023, when news cameras tried to catch a glimpse of former President Donald Trump arriving for an arraignment in lower Manhattan.

“The entire building was covered in scaffolding, and we could barely see him when he got out of the car,” Levine said. “It has kind of defined our aesthetic.”

Adams has called for potential penalties of up to \$6,000 monthly for failing to do work integral to removing a shed.



New Yorkers both human and canine have grown accustomed to scaffolding overhead.

Some New Yorkers say they have lived so long surrounded by scaffolding that they doubt the current proposals will lead to change.

In 2021, residents at 51 West 86th St. threw a facetious anniversary party for the sidewalk shed that has loomed, with little interruption, in front of their landmark apartment building for more than 15 years. Information from the city shows that shed permits cover much of that span.

A resident in a unit overlooking one of the scaffolding's planks said it attracts unwanted guests: noisy, messy pigeons.



Naomi Johnson on a roof at Howard Houses, a 10-building NYCHA complex in Brooklyn.

“The procreating, the feeding of the babies, the squawking,” the resident said. “We just keep the windows closed and the music on.”

The city in 2022 sued the building’s owner, Jacob Weinreb, of Weinreb Management, for failing to correct “hazardous facade defects” at 11 properties in the company’s portfolio. The case is continuing.

Weinreb said his company has been actively doing facade work, and some sheds are already down.

A number of scaffolds are at New York City Housing Authority complexes, such as Howard Houses, a sprawling campus with 10 apartment buildings—each with scaffolding several years old—in Brooklyn’s Brownsville neighborhood.

Naomi Johnson, president of the complex’s tenants association, said she objected when the city decorated some of the sheds there with art.

“I want them down,” she said, adding that the city told her some could be down soon. “I don’t need them to be beautified.”

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