

# Montreal building that burned in deadly fire had repeated safety violations, documents show

FRÉDÉRIK-XAVIER DUHAMEL >

PUBLISHED APRIL 28, 2023

UPDATED APRIL 29, 2023

FOR SUBSCRIBERS

This article was published more than 1 year ago. Some information may no longer be current.



Firefighters work to extinguish a fire in a building in Old Montreal, on March 16.

GRAHAM HUGHES/THE CANADIAN PRESS

The Old Montreal building where seven people died in a fire last month was flagged multiple times by the city's fire department for safety violations since 2009,

according to records obtained by The Globe and Mail.

Some violations, forwarded in 2011 to the Régie du bâtiment du Québec (RBQ) – which regulates and enforces building construction and safety in the province – appear to have remained untouched for years. No record of them being addressed was included in the City of Montreal’s response to The Globe’s access-to-information request.

The obtained documents include many inspection reports and notices of non-compliance sent to the owner of the building, Emile Benamor, among other files.

Survivors and parents of victims previously said they did not hear fire alarms the morning of the fatal fire on March 16, and that at least one unit had no windows, trapping people inside as they called for help. Quebec’s chief coroner ordered a public inquiry into the deaths earlier this month, and the cause of the fire remains under investigation.

On Nov. 26, 2009, Geneviève Tremblay, a fire inspector, examined the 14-unit heritage building with Maryse Gagnon, a building inspector for the city. They noticed that the central staircase and the common area corridors of the second and third floor did not have fire doors, that two units had “dead-end corridors” and that the “configuration of evacuation means is non-compliant.”

They also saw that one unit’s layout “means that the other tenants no longer have access to the fire exit,” Ms. Tremblay wrote in a complaint to the RBQ. The plans for the layout were approved by the city when it delivered a permit for renovations on Nov. 2, 2009, and several additional inspections were conducted until the work was completed on Feb. 25, 2010, documents show.

### **Airbnb to pull illegal listings in Quebec days after fatal Montreal fire**

### **Two final bodies pulled from rubble after Old Montreal fire, five bodies identified**

Isaac Alt, the architect who submitted the plans for the 2009 renovations to the city, said in an interview that his work did not change the layout of the third floor, but merely added amenities in an existing room.

According to a timeline included in the city records, the various issues noted during the November, 2009 inspection were corrected as of June 19, 2012.

But a fire department report dated Nov. 22, 2012 states that some of the same issues flagged in 2009 were still non-compliant: “There was no compliant 2nd exit on the 3rd floor,” it says, adding there were other non-compliances related to firewalls and doors.

A document reviewed by fire department officials in 2018 and 2021 indicates some of the same problems.

“Number of exits on the 3rd floor is non-compliant. ... On the third floor, a unit was laid out in the common corridor in front of the emergency staircase window which prevents other tenants from accessing the second mean of evacuation,” says a file that was reviewed by three fire department officials: Sylvain Jalbert on July 24, 2018, Karine Huard on July 27, 2018, and Nicolas Roch on Sept. 8, 2021.

“The correction of this non-compliance must not create a dead-end exit like what can be found on the 2nd floor.”

Another file says not all units have access to an outside exit leading to the ground and that there is “no alarm in the accommodations.” This file was also reviewed by three fire department officials: Mr. Jalbert and Ms. Huard in July, 2018, and Nicole Desjardins on Dec. 11 of that year.

In a file dated June 16, 2011, fire department official Jean-Luc Trempe wrote that he met Mr. Benamor and told him the evacuation routes’ non-compliance was not under the jurisdiction of the fire department. He added that section chief Derry Spence “undertook procedures with the liaison officers to cancel the elements of the prosecution concerning the means of evacuation.”

The Globe had sent an access-to-information request to the RBQ along with the City of Montreal, but the former refused to share any documents, saying it could jeopardize an investigation.

Asked whether the issues referred to the RBQ in 2011 had been addressed, spokesperson Sylvain Lamothe said in an e-mail that an inspection was conducted

and that the file had been transferred to the provincial prosecutor. He said the RBQ would not further comment out of respect for the continuing investigation.

The city through spokesperson Kim Nantais declined to comment. Mr. Benamor did not immediately return requests for comment, nor did his lawyer, Alexandre Bergevin.

The fire department conducted many other inspections throughout the years, often finding several issues at a time.

After an inspection on May 29, 2018, fire department official Cynthia Mac Dougall found 10 distinct non-compliances related to the fire alarm system, fire extinguishers and doors, among other issues. In an inspection two weeks later, Ms. Tremblay found four additional non-compliances related to firewalls, extinguishers and a missing door handle.

Those were eventually corrected, according to later inspection reports.

But another inspection report by Ms. Tremblay states that, as late as Nov. 20, 2020, the alarm system in the building was still non-compliant. There is no record of this issue being corrected in the documents shared with The Globe.

Mr. Bergevin said last month that the building's alarm system had been replaced in 2019 and was regularly tested. Regarding the emergency exits, he said the building has a complex layout but had always been deemed compliant.

**Sign up for the Great Reads Newsletter.** A selection of provocative, inspiring, and delightful stories worth your time this weekend.

**SIGN UP** | **EXPLORE NEWSLETTERS**

[Report an editorial error](#)

[Report a technical issue](#)

[Editorial code of conduct](#)

## More from Canada

**Plane overshoots runway at airport in St. John's, N.L., no injuries reported**

---

**Ontario introduces sped-up apprenticeship path into skilled trades for high school students**

---

**Quebec judge rejects request for injunction against pro-Palestinian encampment at McGill University**

---

**Premier Doug Ford, Ontario medical group warn Ottawa's capital-gains tax increase will hurt doctors**

---

**Alberta government reverses planned cut to aid funding for low-income transit riders**

---



**Month-long boycott of Loblaws-owned grocery brands and stores begins**

