The Yellow Light

Stairway to Hell

Don't get burned by incorrect mandates. Be cool about fire safety.

By Jonathan J. Chiarella / May 17, 2025

If you live in an apartment building, when was the last time that you thought to yourself that you need a second staircase? In the event of a fire, would you rather walk out your door to a staircase between your front door and your neighbor's, or would you rather walk past multiple apartments in order to reach a staircase at either end of a hallway?

Apartment buildings in Europe and East Asia can group apartments around a central staircase. The shared space deters crime.[1] For buildings with family-sized units, on every floor is one apartment to the left of the staircase and one to the right. This enables each apartment to sport windows at the front and back of the building. If a building has eight apartments per floor, you arrange them as four pairs. Each pair surrounds a staircase that has its own entrance at the front of the building. It sounds nice, but most American cities forbid this design.

Instead, every apartment must connect with *two* staircases. Even if you had only two apartments per floor, it would break the law

1. The US Department of Education's website refers to the 2003-published *Crime Prevention through Environmental Design* from the National Crime Prevention Council of Singapore. Ten years later, researchers hit upon similar conclusions in the report "Crime in High-Rise Building: Planning for Vertical Community Safety" for the Criminology Research Advisory Council of Australia.

to have only one staircase. To save money and space, the typical floor plan in American buildings will install isolated staircases at both ends of a long, dark hallway. These breed crime and endanger residents. The hallway runs the length of each floor and bisects it, thereby diminishing the quality of life. Every apartment occupies a slice of the front or back of the building—no cross draft in the summer. Two stairwells take up more room than a single large one—less space for apartments.

In addition, construction costs go up. The developer shies away from making a four-story apartment building. If the space is zoned exclusively for residential uses, it may be more feasible for the developer to build a single-family, two-story home that sells for over half a million dollars. With fewer places to live, housing prices climb.

As with many features of the built environment, the early guesswork included good intentions. Evidence was lacking, however, and we immortalized the hunch that two staircases would be safer than one. Decades later, we act as if we are obeying a holy tradition.

Imagine the two building types in the introduction. The US style does not sound safer in a fire, because it isn't. The style you see in Japan and Germany doesn't have a reputation for being a deathtrap. New York City permits what is so rare in the US and so common abroad, the single-staircase design, but this doesn't contribute to more fire deaths than do buildings in other US cities.[2] A misplaced sense of rightness saddled developers with the wrong regulations while increasing our rents and mortgage payments.

2. Henry Grabar, "American Housing Crisis," February 28, 2025, Slate.

Other costs get baked into the price. When you look around town, you are not seeing a widespread preference for driveways. Laws for parking minimums have made neighborhoods look the way they do. Such rules blocked other options while making houses more expensive and stifling dreams.

Let's say you're preparing to clear an old, rotten building in a small city and build a house there. Within walking or biking distance are the bank, city hall, the post office, a grocery store, and the train station. Now you're thinking you could make a large duplex and rent out half the building to a friend or give your elderly parent a place to live. It sounds great, but then comes the matter of parking.

A law demands that you provide space to store two or even three cars. The fire department may have even endorsed such rules in an attempt to get cars off the street. Ironically, however, plentiful parking, desolate landscapes, and excessive spacing between buildings have entrenched car reliance and, thus, car ownership. The law is the law, however. If you won't make your planned house smaller, you have to acquire more land and pave over that. You may have to buy the building next door and demolish it.

In addition to hurting your wallet, these changes will drain the pocketbook of local government. Almost all local services such as schools, libraries, snow removal, and street lighting depend on revenue from property taxes—not land value taxes. Surface parking does not grow crops, nor is it the foundation of a prosperous store. It's just some asphalt and tar. If you didn't remove the building next

door to make parking and instead shrank your dream house, the lot now generates less tax revenue per square foot.

Maybe you can think of city blocks with townhouses and shops all in a line, without garages or parking lots in front, but they're old and rare. You're not allowed to make them today. New construction doesn't get exemptions on staircases, parking, setbacks, or exclusionary zoning. Every year, houses, businesses, and people spread farther apart.

Emergency responders will also travel greater distances. Additionally, the town must purchase giant fire trucks in the name of safety. Higher prices mean fewer engines and fewer upgrades. These vehicles demand wider streets. Increased roadway maintenance takes even more money away from firefighter salaries and equipment. Massive trucks need massive garages, which lie far from where people live—and the fires. Because firefighters are also the first medics on the scene, a slower response saves fewer lives.[3]

Old excuses for safety do not justify every safety code today. Look at the numbers. The whole developed world and decades of data stand before us. If France had been wrong to not use forty-foot fire trucks, then France would've realized the error of its ways and ordered new fleets from Detroit. But France wasn't wrong, nor was South Korea or Britain. America blundered when it turned "Could *X* help with this case?" into "We must have *X* for every situation."

3. The National Fire Protection Association's 1710 standards stress the importance of response times. NFPA records show that decreasing losses stem from the decline in total fires, not improved firefighting. A paper in *Fire Technology* (Stephen Kerber, "Analysis of Changing Residential Fire Dynamics," 48, no. 4) underscores the need for quick action. Houses from the 2000s see fire "flashovers" in about one-tenth the time as houses from the 1970s.