

VOLUME 6R

From Brackets to Rust, Balcony Maintenance Is Key

By Shamontiel L. Vaughn and Anna Quinn



Editor's Note: This image (and the visual images below) are not the Champlain Towers in Miami, Florida.

For multi-unit tenants in Florida, news about the Champlain Towers South (a 12-story, 136-unit, 40-year-old condominium building in Surfside) collapsing in a matter of minutes left a mark. Most residents were asleep, and only three survived the initial collapse, reports the **Tallahassee Democrat**. Approximately three dozen people were able to escape from a still-standing portion of the condo, but the death toll of 98 made this one of the worst building collapses in U.S. history.

While the exact reason for the collapse is ongoing, an investigative report from the **Miami Herald** states that the ground floor parking area and pool deck caved in seven minutes before the residential tower fell. In theory, and with the help of engineering professor Dawn Lehman from the University of Washington, "design failures, shoddy construction, damage and neglect" are to blame—primarily one side of the condo held up by 24 x 24 inch columns while the other side only had half that column size.

All of this is widely reported now, but the average tenant (or landlord) may not be aware of these property development flaws. Meanwhile, tenants often ask questions about the actual unit during the walk-through, not the structure of the building. After this news unfolded, tenants may choose to reevaluate some of the questions they never asked before, including balcony safety, whether **Building Violations should be called**, and what balcony repairs have already been made and/or are in need. Read on to find out how tenants can get ahead of balcony maintenance before it becomes an issue post move-in.



Speak Up About Rusty Brackets

While it might take a professional to officially evaluate the stability of a balcony, there are many signs tenants can look out for, whether they're already living in a unit or viewing it for the first time.

Potential deterioration on a balcony can often be found by looking at its railings, which tenants should first make sure aren't loose or unstable. Other warnings include rusted or corroded metal or missing fasteners, both on the railings and the brackets that hold up the balcony from underneath. Concrete cracks, flakes, stains or spalling—when a fragment has fallen out—around the handrail can also be cause for concern, according to experts with the **Florida Community Association Professionals**.



Should tenants notice any of these defects, they should speak up about the balcony's condition, and ask the owner or Realtor about balcony inspections and code compliance at the property. It's possible this deterioration could be a building violation that requires owners (or a property manager) to resolve.

How detailed these codes are when it comes to the maintenance of balconies can vary by city. For example, **Houston** requires property owners to repair holes, cracks, breaks or loose material that is "reasonably likely to constitute a health or safety hazard." **Miami code** also gets specific, requiring that property owners keep balconies free of "chipping, rotting, pitting, cracking, graffiti and peeling." **Dallas details** that support posts, columns and canopies on balconies must be "securely fastened and anchored."

In any case, if concerns about a balcony's safety are reported, property owners will likely be **required to complete an inspection** or a load test to make sure the structure is safe. On top of completing permit checks when a property or balcony is built, inspections of balconies for multi-unit buildings are often required every few years.



Ask About Weight Maximums

Tenants can also prioritize balcony safety by knowing and abiding by any weight maximums. Further north in cities such as Chicago, **another tragic incident** in 2003 occurred at a Lincoln Park neighborhood gathering due to balcony weight and construction problems. A combination of partygoers and a poorly constructed porch left 13 people dead and more than 50 people injured. CBS News confirmed the owner had not obtained proper permits to build this porch beforehand.

Seven years later in Austin, a similar incident happened with partygoers and a balcony collapse. Fortunately, of the 28 injured, there were no fatalities or life-threatening injuries, reports **the Chron**.

While the weight limit can change based on size, builders are still required to construct balconies to hold a certain amount of weight, which is measured in pounds per square foot. In both **Texas** and **Florida**, the requirement is that these structures can hold 40 pounds per square foot, not including the weight of the structure itself. Multiplying that number by the size of the balcony, in square feet, will equal the total weight the balcony can hold.

If weight maximums for balconies aren't posted anywhere in the building, tenants should ask landlords what they are. This way, they can make sure not to exceed the limit when using the amenity.



Inquire About Power Washing and Staining

On top of ensuring safety, a best practice for tenants living with a balcony is to keep it clean and looking its best. One option for this is power washing, which goes further than simply sweeping or cleaning day-to-day messes on the balcony space. Tenants should consider asking their landlord about pressure washing the balcony if there is a buildup of visible stains or, in the worst case, **signs of mold or mildew** on the balcony's surfaces.

Remember to check the lease about who would pay for these services. Generally, it's recommended that power washing be completed on an annual basis. Professional power washers will check for shaky banisters, rusted brackets, loose stairs and other flaws before they start. In regard to weathered wood, it's not uncommon for porch specialists to recommend replacing wood planks as opposed to power washing mold, mildew or brittle pieces.

Power washing and staining often work hand in hand. Many exterior wood stains are made with formulas to seal out water and block sun rays that could damage the balcony's floor and railings over time. They can also hide scuffs or imperfections in the surface that may have appeared from regular wear and tear.

Staining is also aesthetically pleasing. However, customers should be reminded that once a dark stain is used, lighter stains cannot be used the following year or later. It must either be removed or the landlord will speak up and say the same rules will apply to the outside of the single-family home or multi-unit.

Ideally, power washing, staining, repairs and inspections would have already been completed before the tenant moves in. For long-term tenants, be prepared to enter and exit through an alternate door if/when it's scheduled the following year. For both power washing and staining, the property is often tied off to avoid footprints and additional dirt tracking onto the wood before it can dry and seal.

Assuming the repairs are not extensive enough that stairwells and balconies will have to be replaced altogether, power washing and staining take time to dry. Expect the wait time for power washing to be anywhere from 24 hours to three days, largely depending on consistently dry and sunny weather, as well as the location. (Narrow stairwells between two buildings will take longer to dry than a balcony facing a sunny street.) The rainiest seasons



in Texas (**March to May** and late fall) and Florida (**July to September**) are also the worst times to schedule this type of maintenance.

While tenants complete the final walk-through with a Realtor (or landlord), gather all move-in fees and confirm this **move-out/move-in checklist** was completed, this is a perfect time to make sure the balcony maintenance is treated with care.

