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Fire Escapes

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Fire Escapes

We all know and use the term *fire escape*. Of course it can mean many things, but, when we hear it, we think of exterior iron *ladders*, with platforms at each window, down the side of a building. We think of those iron ladders, but we see very few of them today. Outside of action movies and love stories, where they continue to make fine *props*, the fire escape had a rather short life.

We began building upward in the mid-nineteenth century. Six and seven-story office buildings and tall *tenement* houses came before the creation of elevator-served, steel-framed skyscrapers. Many of those old buildings had only one open wooden *stairwell*. When there were stairwell doors, they often opened inward.

Historian Sara Wermiel tells how, when catastrophic fires reached those buildings in the 1870s, state legislatures finally *enacted* laws requiring *means* for getting people out. All this meant new technology, and what means were *devised*! Elementary: *equip* each upper room with a long rope. Fantastic: a hat-like *parachute*, anchored under the chin, and boots with highly elastic soles. Practical: *canvas* escape *chutes*, like those used on jet airplanes today. Rube Goldberg: a rope and *pulley* system that let a person lower herself in a canvas seat.

The familiar American ‘skeleton’ fire escape finally *emerged*. And that artefact has become as familiar as the farm windmill or the railroad depot. Yet where are they? Here in the young city of Houston, fire escapes are very hard to find. You’ll do better looking for them in older towns – New Haven or St. Paul.

In fact, they have many huge *shortcomings*. Fires come out windows in floors below the one you’re on. They invite traffic jams. The final ladder, raised above street-level to *thwart* thieves, very often jams when you reach it. And, despite that ladder, fire escapes can provide unwanted access into buildings.

The beginning of the end for the old iron fire escape was New York’s terrible Triangle Shirtwaist fire where 145 *garment* workers died in 1911 as their ten-story factory building burned. Many died on fire escapes as flames *billowed* up from the windows below them. Fire escapes melted and buckled, dropping people to their deaths.

Today’s solution is the closed, insulated stairwell, protected by fire doors that keep smoke from getting in. That’s a still-evolving

technology. But it’s one that saved countless lives before the burning World Trade Center towers finally collapsed. In-deed, a new development is a closed stairwell built outside the building itself, as a kind of enclosed fire escape.

Yet the old iron fire escape remains engraved upon our minds as a wonderfully durable American icon. It’s where we imagine sitting with a good book, high above the streets. It’s where the *gunman* escapes, or gets caught. It seems astonishing that that’s all in my mind. I can’t remember ever having actually climbed on one. ■

Die Feuerleiter wurde durch unzählige amerikanische Filme zur Ikone. Dennoch war sie nur sehr kurz ein unverzichtbares, architektonisches Element.



<i>billow, to</i>	<i>sich bauschen</i>
<i>canvas</i>	<i>Segeltuch, Plane</i>
<i>chute</i>	<i>Rutsche</i>
<i>devise, to</i>	<i>entwickeln, gestalten</i>
<i>emerge, to</i>	<i>aufkommen, auftreten</i>
<i>enact, to</i>	<i>erlassen, verordnen</i>
<i>equip, to</i>	<i>ausrüsten</i>
<i>escape</i>	<i>Flucht (-weg)</i>
<i>garment</i>	<i>Bekleidung</i>
<i>gunman</i>	<i>bewaffneter Räuber</i>
<i>ladder</i>	<i>Leiter</i>
<i>means</i>	<i>hier: (Hilfs-) Mittel</i>
<i>parachute</i>	<i>Fallschirm</i>
<i>prop</i>	<i>Requisite</i>
<i>pulley</i>	<i>Seilrolle</i>
<i>shortcoming</i>	<i>Schwäche, Mangel</i>
<i>stairwell</i>	<i>Treppenschacht</i>
<i>tenement</i>	<i>Miethaus</i>
<i>thwart, to</i>	<i>vereiteln, entgegenwirken</i>

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