February 24, 2025

A few minutes after my class started a fire alarm went off—it communicates with a loud, blaring, unavoidable noise interspersed with verbal instructions. I waited for a moment before telling everyone to pack up and leave. In that third-floor corridor we were the only group moving towards the exit of the new one point two-billion-dollar building. Inside, hallways line the space between continuous glass panels that enclose the lower floors and the fifty-eight walled-in classrooms at the center. There are no operable windows and triple-wide, open-air staircases double as emergency exits.

When we turned onto the last staircase to leave there was a drop-down metal gate sealing the exit. Another PhD student teacher walked towards us from the south entrance where a second gate had been released. More students and teachers gathered in the atrium. Occasionally we would hear instructions broadcast over a speaker system. The first time this happened students suspected an active shooter. This time a student said that "it is more important for them to save the building than to save us."

On November 2, 2023, the university's student newspaper published a satirical article that began: "NYU administrators announced a new fire evacuation policy at the Paulson Center: not evacuating at all." A few weeks earlier, on October 11, 2023, three blocks away, the Triangle Fire Memorial was dedicated to the victims and legacy of the 1911 Triangle Shirtwaist Factory fire. The fire killed one hundred and forty-six factory workers in fifteen minutes, mostly women and girls. The doors of the factory had been locked, following protocol. When the fire broke out the workers who were trapped inside burned, others jumped from the eighth, ninth, and tenth floors, unsuccessfully.

On February 24, 2025, fire trucks arrived, and someone passed through a small door on the side of the large metal gate, just enough space for one person to fit. Everyone who had gathered on the second floor filtered through that space, single file onto the street. Each classroom holds twenty students and one instructor, and they are usually full. Not counting the students in the common areas this makes one thousand four hundred and fifty people that would need to fit through a single pedestrian door. If it takes each person one second that's twenty-four minutes for everyone to evacuate.

When I asked the security guards why they adhere to this protocol, they said it was "to keep everyone organized during an emergency." Most students and faculty had stayed in their classrooms throughout the alarm. Later a student told me that the alarm goes off "all the time at all hours, and the firewalls always go down and people seem to be instructed to stay inside unless told otherwise." Looking into the classrooms as we left, some students were working to focus on tests and others were listening to lectures, but no one was questioning whether or not they should leave.

-A. Parmer