

## A History of Fire Escapes

Fire! Quick, where is the fire escape?

Indeed, the fire escape is a well-known invention in the field of architecture and construction, and can rightfully be called one of the most life-saving inventions ever created by man. The fire escape is an emergency exit that is mounted to the outside of a building. It allows for a quick escape in the event of a fire or another emergency that would make the ordinary exit impossible to use. Usually, fire escapes are used for multiple-story buildings, including businesses, apartments and condos. The fire escape is an important part of planning a home or business in a crowded urban area.

A fire escape will usually have a number of horizontal platforms, one for each story, and accompanying ladders or stairs. Railings usually accompany these fire escapes, though it should be noted that these usually are not standard railings as they do not meet official code. However, since railings are not legally required on fire escapes it is considered a courtesy and a safety feature nonetheless. Ladders are constructed in such a way as to provide a safe fall for the escapee, while preventing vandalism or burglary by being placed above climbing level. When there is an exit door (often times fire escapes are only accessible through a window) it usually has an installed fire alarm system.

What is the history of the fire escape as people today know it? They date back to the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, when much of civilization was just becoming industrialized. Fire safety became a major concern and building owners were required by law to provide fire escape routes in their new property. The fire escape invention seemed to be a simple and cost-efficient way to address this requirement.

As far as a patented fire escape, the first credited person for such an invention was Anna Connelly in 1887. She invented the exterior staircase, used specifically for a fire escape. Many companies saw advantages to using this system and decided to incorporate that patent into their own buildings. These exterior staircases were cheap to build and could be added to the existing construction very easily, without the need to restructure the walls.

However, as the 1900s approached, with a boom in construction and public housing, exterior staircase fire escapes became increasingly problematic, especially in big cities with a large population that was poor. The flaw of fire escapes was big news for a long time, and led to many fictitious plots for books and movies (including *The Window* and *Rear Window*) based on the idea that unauthorized persons were using fire escape staircases to their dishonest advantage. Even in nonfiction (namely a powerful photograph by Boston Herald American photographer Stanley J. Forman featuring a faulty fire escape) people were decrying Anna Connelly's invention, almost a century after its patent. The

public scare eventually resulted in stricter safety codes imposed by state government.

This history helps to explain why there are fewer exterior staircases today and more modern fire safety techniques that address the issue of escaping a fire.

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