

Another Way to Cut the Cost of Facade Inspections

By Frank Lovece

➤ **IT'S ONE OF** the dreaded duties of most co-op and condo boards. Every five years, in buildings of six or more stories, building owners must conduct a hands-on inspection of their facades and map out any required repairs. It's an involved – and costly – process, especially if boards play by the book.

“Usually when we survey a building, we're using myriad techniques to map what's happening on the facade,” explains architect Scott Kamen, a principal at Kamen Tall Architects. This starts with a ground inspection, generally using binoculars, to determine the most likely places a building has been damaged by wind, sun, or abuse from a neighboring smokestack. Once that representative sample is chosen, the inspector does a close-up, hands-on examination. “The traditional method,” Kamen says, “is a suspended scaffold, usually 20 feet wide.” If you're lucky, the scaffold can simply be hung from hooks on the parapet, which is relatively inexpensive. If this is not possible, then it needs to be mounted with a system of outriggers and counter-weights that workers have to haul into your building, up to the roof – and deeper into your bank account.

Scaffold drops aren't cheap. Aside from the cost of the inspector, a single drop can average from \$3,500 to \$7,000 to install, operate, and dismantle. At least one scaffold drop is required for each wall, whether it faces a street or a courtyard.



But there are alternatives that can be both cheaper and more effective than scaffold drops. One alternative is rappellers who use ropes to drop from roof to ground, inspecting the facade as they descend. Another is bucket trucks, also known as “boom trucks” or “boom lifts,” and commonly used by firefighters.

“At 90 percent of my buildings, it's a boom truck,” says Vito Mangini, director of management at Tudor Realty Services. One reason the trucks are popular with boards, he says, is there's no need to bring scaffolding equipment into the building. “You pull the truck up, have couple of flag men on the street, and there's an engineer and an operator in the bucket.”

Philliss Nappi, a building manager with AKAM Associates, adds, “Any time you don't have to bother one of your unit-owners or shareholders, it's a good thing. You can avoid going into residents' apartments or out on their balconies.”

And since equipment does not have to be installed on the building, there is no downtime, adds Eric Vonderhyde, a principal at Bertolini Architectural Works. A scaffold normally takes a day for installation, a day for inspection, and a third day to break down and remove it. “It can turn into four,

five, six days depending on the weather, scheduling, stuff like that,” he says. “And you're constrained to its area and it's hard [for the inspector] to look beyond it. With a bucket truck, you can move that thing around quite a bit – 40, 50 feet left or right, because the arm telescopes.”

Vonderhyde estimates that bucket trucks start at \$7,500 for a smaller building and can be \$15,000 (including the cost of an operator) for a bucket truck that can go 180 feet up. But since you can cover the same area as you could with three scaffold drops – and some buildings have three or four exposed facades, each requiring a drop – the price is about the same.

A contractor doing a scaffold drop must obtain a Department of Buildings CD5 permit, a complicated process, while a contractor using a bucket truck simply needs a \$50 Department of Transportation permit.

Boom trucks do have limitations. “There are a lot of narrow streets where you can't fit a boom truck,” says Vonderhyde. Other problem areas are the backs of buildings or courtyards with no street access. But on buildings where boom trucks can get up close, the savings, as with rappellers, can be considerable. ■