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## Who'da Think It? Some Did

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"Oh my God, I thought a truck had smashed into our home," Janice Steele said yesterday. Steele lives in Long Island City, and her frame house on 11th Street and 37th Avenue shook. It was around 7:30 a.m.



"I ran outside ready to yell at my neighbors who keep a lot of trucks on their property, but the street was quiet. I didn't know what to think," she said.

Steele never thought earthquake.

"Even though it happened here once before. That was in 1985. That time, I thought the boiler had exploded," she said.

Her phone rang a few minutes later.

"It was Rose Gorshesky, my next-door neighbor. She's 84. She said, 'Did you hear that rumble?'" I talked to Steele yesterday afternoon at her job as office manager for Petramoor Mfg., three blocks from her home.

"In New York, you worry about a lot of things: muggings, rapes, robberies.

Who thinks of an earthquake?" she said.

Charles Merguerian, 51, a geology professor at Hofstra University who grew up in Queens, says he thinks of earthquakes. Merguerian says a few years ago he tried to warn the Giuliani administration about the inevitability of an earthquake on the East Coast but was rebuffed.

Television anchorman Chuck Scarborough is another who thinks about earthquakes. Scarborough even wrote a novel in 1991, titled "Aftershock," that dealt with just such an apocalyptic event.

"The undisputed scientific fact is that New York City is sitting on a seismic time bomb," he said yesterday as he prepared for last night's WNBC-TV broadcast.

Scarborough's book was made into a television movie, which showed New York hit by a killer earthquake that wipes out half the city's population. In the movie, motorists were suffocated in the Queens-Midtown Tunnel, which Merguerian, who was a consultant on the book, says is built along several fault lines.

But who wants to listen to doomsayers? Even if they are people who are as well credentialed as both of these men. Like the comedian says, they get no respect.

In fact, they are treated a little like the street preachers in Times Square who proclaim the end of the world to indifferent passersby.

It's different on the West Coast, of course. Earthquakes and fires there are a terrible reality. Did you know, for instance, that the building codes there are four times stronger than those in New York? I didn't know this until I talked to Scarborough, who takes his geology seriously and who agrees with Merguerian that the city fathers take quake predictions with a wink.

"It's scary," says Scarborough, adding that "scientists can differ with one another about global warming and nuclear winters, but they all agree there will be an earthquake here." That little tremor we had yesterday should be a wake-up call. But I really don't think anyone in this city takes the predictions of a quake here seriously.

Merguerian, who lived on West 125th Street, which is on one of the main fault lines in town, was online with the United States Geological Survey Web site when I reached him at Hofstra.

He has mapped the entire city for fault lines and recently finished a survey of the third water tunnel, where he stayed for 100 days.

"I found 300 fault lines there," he said, adding that none of them was worrisome.

But he said that while yesterday's quake was a hiccup on the scale of such events, "you have to wonder whether this foretells a much larger event." He has no doubt that such an event is in this city's future.

"I think in my lifetime we will see it," he said. The last big earthquake in New York came in 1884 and left "12-foot-long cracks that were 10 feet deep and two feet wide," along city avenues.

But most disturbing was the geologist's assertion that the city is not prepared for an earthquake. "I offered my services to them, but I was turned down," he said.

I asked Scarborough why he had an interest in earthquakes. "It started after the 1989 earthquakes in Armenia," he said. Scarborough eventually did a three-part series on television on quakes, which led to his writing "Aftershock." Scarborough is as pessimistic as his pal Merguerian about city planning for an earthquake here, something both consider to be certainty.

"The political will is hard to muster. It's too bad," he said. "We've been given a lot of warnings."