

Chute to safety

Israeli entrepreneur Eli Nir did not want others to have to suffer what he had experienced as he watched fire-fighters struggle up and down ladders to rescue his eight year old son, trapped on the top floor of a burning, high rise hotel. His son escaped unscathed. Others, in similar situations, have been less fortunate.

The solution conceived by Mr. Nir was a simple one: collapsible steel coils sheathed in fireproof, Kevlar-like fabric are installed on the outside of the upper floors of a high rise building, and accessed by emergency exit doors. When a fire alarm sounds, the tubes unfurl. The occupants of the building step through the door and slide down to the ground – much like in a giant water-slide at an amusement park. The speed of their descent is controlled by a series of “steps” incorporated into the structure of the chute.

Mr. Nir filed a total of six PCT applications relating to his “rescue sleeve” between 2000 and 2002. His concept was developed by

Tel Aviv-based manufacturers, Advanced Evacuation Systems (AES), who raised US\$ 1 million from private investors. Former Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak joined the board of directors to help promote the invention.

The demonstration of the prototype at a Washington hotel in October 2002 caused a splash, as the press gathered to watch a series of volunteers launch themselves through the 50 meter chute, and emerge beaming at the bottom. AES’ statistics indicated that the structure would enable a person to descend 25 stories in under 10 seconds, so that 15 people could be rescued per minute. New models were planned, based on a corkscrew principle, for use up to 100 floors high.

The deputy chief of the Washington fire department, Mike Smith, was impressed by what he saw, and the chute was singled out by Time Magazine as one of the Best Inventions of 2002. But not all inventions live up to their promise. Take-up by



Courtesy of AES

At the press demonstration volunteers launched themselves from the 11th floor of a Washington Hotel.

potential clients failed to match expectations, and the company concluded that further work was needed in order to secure active backing from U.S. health and safety bodies. For now, all has gone quiet at AES. A case of back to the drawing board? Or down the tubes? ■

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