

Haiti's Buildings Weren't Fit To Withstand Quakes

by Christopher Joyce

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(Top) M_Eriksson via flickr; (bottom) Jorge Cruz/AP

The National Palace in Port-au-Prince, Haiti's presidential residence, before and after Tuesday's earthquake.

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Haiti's magnitude 7.0 earthquake struck a country whose buildings were barely built to engineering standards and were hopelessly fragile in the grip of such a strong quake.

That's the assessment of Pierre Fouche, an earthquake engineer from Haiti — in fact, the country's only earthquake engineer, to his knowledge.

Fouche says when he was studying engineering in Haiti his professors told him that at least one building there would survive an earthquake — the presidential residence known as the National Palace.

The palace now lies in ruins.

Constructing Disaster

Fouche is now getting his doctorate in earthquake engineering at the University of Buffalo. He says his family has survived Tuesday's quake, but he's saddened by the fact that so many who didn't were killed because buildings in Haiti are so poorly constructed.

"Many people are doing whatever they want; they can build whatever they want," Fouche says. "One of the biggest problems too is that in the country we do not even have a national building code, which is very sad."

Fouche says people with money can build reinforced concrete buildings with steel rods to strengthen walls and floors. But he says even these may not meet engineering standards to support a load vertically, and they definitely cannot handle the side-to-side forces of an