

Our Town

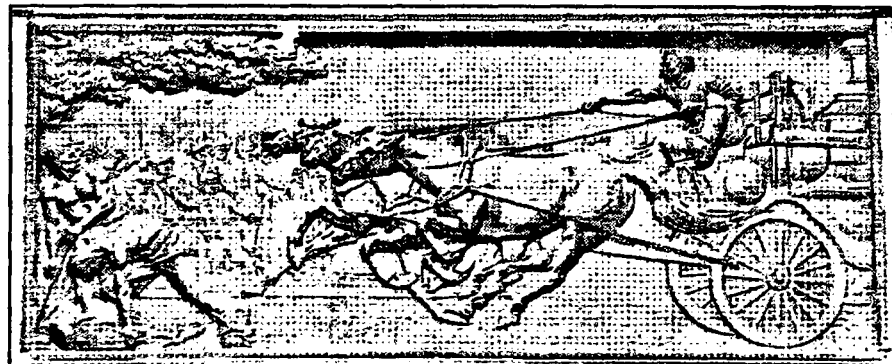
IN YOUR NEIGHBORHOOD

9/27/01

A Place to Remember

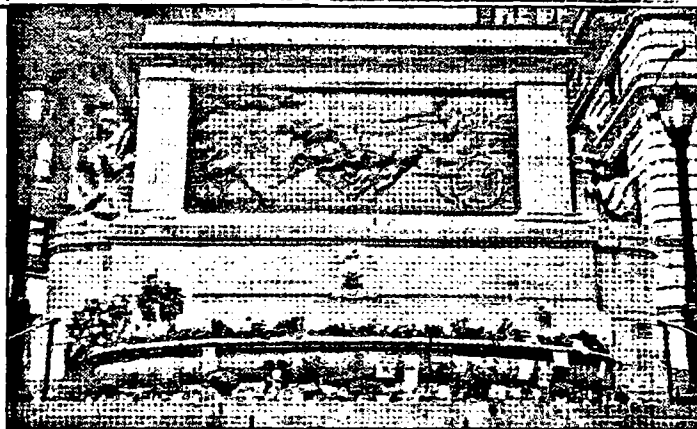
There is a special place in our hearts for the rescue workers who sacrificed so much in the hours after the Sept. 11 attack on the World Trade Center. There is also a special place in our neighborhood where New Yorkers have gathered to pay tribute to the city's firefighters. At the corner of Riverside Drive and West 100th Street, looking out over the park and the serene waters of the Hudson

a pleasant stopping point for dogwalkers and a good place to stretch before setting off on a jog through the park. Only in recent years has it been restored, thanks to the efforts of volunteer groups working in Riverside Park. But in the last two weeks, it has been remade. Whatever designer Harold Buren Magonigle intended, the memorial has become a gathering point for New



below, stands a monument to New York City's firefighters.

In colonial days, all men were required to answer the "hue and cry" of a fire alarm. As the city grew, the state legislature chartered the Fire Department of the City of New York in March 1778, but fire-



On Riverside Drive at West 100th Street stands a monument to the city's bravest.

fighting remained a haphazard affair throughout the 19th century. Volunteers often signed up for service in search of political maneuvering (Boss Tweed got his start as a fireman), male camaraderie and heavy drinking. In the wood-framed, working-class neighborhoods of lower Manhattan, there was little they could do to help. Over time, professionalization and new technology made the FDNY one of the world's foremost services, able to respond in a crowded city in an average of six minutes or less. But it is still a masculine undertaking; less than 1 percent of the force is female, and in a cosmopolitan city, it remains stubbornly white.

In 1912, thankful New Yorkers erected a memorial to the city's fallen firefighters in its current Upper West Side location, tribute to "soldiers in a war that never ends." The monument itself has often been overlooked,

Yorkers who seek to pay tribute to the courage and dedication of women and men who will never be forgotten. A few days after the attack, a group gathered for a candlelight vigil. Those candles remain, tributes to the fallen and a symbol of New York's unity in diversity: dime-store candles stand next to scented sticks from fancy shops; candles for the Jewish New Year *dinner* with the same light as those from Latino bodegas. Flags and flowers abound, and there are touching drawings left by children who have grown up a little faster in last two weeks than anyone had planned. But what stuck with me most was a homely clam shell, on which some anonymous New Yorker had scrawled a quiet tribute to the determination of the city's bravest: "No matter what." No matter what, indeed.

— Christopher Capozzola

THE AIR DOWNTOWN: TESTS CALL IT CLEAN, BUT COUGHS AROUND

**Despite E.P.A. Assurances,
Many Still Complain
Of Respiratory Clogs**

JERRY NADLER SAYS HE'S UNCONVINCED

**Many Insist They Have Headaches;
One Word Still Floating: Asbestos**

BY JOSH BENSON

The fire where the World Trade Center once stood is extinguished; the city has erected a viewing platform for the benefit of ground-zero tourists; and former Mayor Rudolph Giuliani has already outlined his vision for a grand monument at the site.

It has become a point of pride for leaders of the city, the state and the nation, determined to put a brave face on things, that the scene of the Sept. 11 attack has become an almost normal part of the New York landscape.

But many of the elected officials who represent the areas hit most heavily by the events of Sept. 11, as well as some experts who were charged with examining the fall-out, have been urging just about anyone who will listen to take a closer look at what is happening in lower Manhattan. They say that the understandable quest for normalcy carries the risk of papering over potentially hazardous problems, including contamination by asbestos and a potentially toxic cocktail of materials thrown together after the collapse of the towers. In addition, several scientists who researched the contamination issue called into question some of the conclusions reached by the government about the environmental safety of areas around the World Trade Center.

"We've been urging the governmental agencies to do more environmental testing on the sites, but they really haven't listened to local officials on that," said Representative Jerrold Nadler, whose district includes the World Trade Center site. "They still haven't done the breadth of testing necessary to allay people's rational fears."

In the weeks following Sept. 11, hundreds of tests were done by governmental agencies, including the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, the state Department of Health and the city Office of Emergency Management. The results showed that, for the most part, levels of asbestos and other potentially harmful materials were below levels that posed an immediate or long-term risk. While there's no reason to believe that those numbers are inaccurate, some scientists say that far more research is necessary before deciding that the health risks are minimal.

"Sometimes it looks to me that the E.P.A. and city agencies are more concerned with keeping people from panicking than they are with providing any meaningful data," said one scientist who works for a federally funded research-and-development center involved with one of the studies of contaminants downtown. "They're saying that there's nothing to worry about, but there's no way they've been able to test every spot where studies have indicated that there might be dangerous asbestos or other materials."

Other scientists involved with researching the potential hazards expressed unease with one of the central premises of the agencies' conclusions that everything is all right—namely that asbestos and other potentially hazardous materials are only dangerous if airborne. "The presence of asbestos in dust is not necessarily a significant health hazard," reads the E.P.A. Web site. "The dust must become airborne and be inhaled for it to cause significant health problems."

The dust—which was spread not only over outdoor surfaces in lower Manhattan, but also into cars, apartments and nooks on building exteriors—is in fact harmless as long as it lays dormant. The problem, according to some experts, is that such dust is made airborne quite eas-

ily when disturbed by anything from a gust of wind to a well-meaning building superintendent with a broom. "Certainly asbestos is not an issue if it remains in the surface dust," said Roger Clark, a researcher at the U.S. Geological Survey who oversaw a study commissioned by the E.P.A. that detected pockets of asbestos and other materials. "The concern is about whether you hit a patch of asbestos and might get a lot of it airborne quickly and breathe that in, or if you use some other method that could concentrate

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the dust, like stirring it up with an ordinary vacuum cleaner. The dust would have to be cleaned up with appropriate protective measures."

Despite such concerns, however, much of the removal of potentially hazardous dust is being handled in an amateurish and haphazard way, according to downtown

community leaders. "There has been a completely uncoordinated effort to clean up a lot of the dust that settled on windowsills and roofs and apartments," said Madelyn Wils, chair of Community Board 1. "Basically we have had thousands of people who still haven't cleaned their apartments properly, when we know that there was asbestos and other materials among the initial debris. Because people haven't gotten enough direction on how to deal with this, they've gone around

**'People have gotten sick from
this, getting headaches.'**

—Madelyn Wils,
chair of Community Board 1.

brushing off their canopies and sweeping their roofs, putting this dust right back into the air, onto cars, and back into people's apartments through air filters. Even people who cleaned their apartments or businesses are having to re-clean."

Ms. Wils was among a group of local officials that commissioned an independent gathering of dust samples from resi-

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1-7-02

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dential areas downtown. They came up with some disturbing results. Testing inside three randomly selected apartments, for example, revealed that carpets and curtains were inundated with dust that was laden with copious amounts of asbestos and other unpleasant materials. Because many residents and business owners have not hired professional asbestos-abatement services to do their cleanup, it is not unlikely that many indoor surfaces are still contaminated.

Another independent study—this one commissioned by the board of directors of a small park in Tribeca—found dangerously high levels of asbestos coating the playground, prompting embarrassed government officials to close it down after children had been playing there for days.

FEARS NOT ABATED

According to Ms. Wils, residents are far from convinced that the peril has passed. "People have gotten sick from this, getting headaches," said Ms. Wils. "We should be making a much greater effort to find out what this all means." The unease has only grown since the late December revelation that a quarter of the 6,500 firefighters who did rescue work at ground zero have fallen ill with respiratory ailments.

Judging by the numbers, however, the results of the research that has been made available to the public is largely encouraging. In the areas the E.P.A. tested, for example, levels are consistently below governmentally dictated danger levels of asbestos. And the more that time passes, the more those levels are likely to diminish. An E.P.A. spokeswoman, Mary Helen Cervantes, pointed out that the agency continues to test for a wide range of pollutants in and around ground zero, and said that the E.P.A. has gone to great lengths to put the public at ease about potential dangers. "A significant piece of our involvement has been providing that information to the public," said Ms. Cervantes. "A lot of it is

on the Web, and we also go to a lot of tenant meetings to speak directly to them."

However useful a broader collection of data might be, elected officials and others say that they've had problems addressing the glut of information already available, much of which is also in the public domain. Mr. Nadler, Ms. Wils and other officials plan to assemble their own team of researchers to pore over the data that has already been gathered, and to offer an analysis independent of those offered by government agencies.

In the meantime, Mr. Nadler remains skeptical of the assurances offered to downtown residents. "People in authority are always going to tell people that things are safe, and to move back and not to worry about anything," he said. "You can never say that anything is perfectly safe. This is an unprecedented event and an unprecedented tragedy, and it is clear that there are limitations to what science can tell us right now."

DARRIN MCCOLLETER/GETTY IMAGES

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