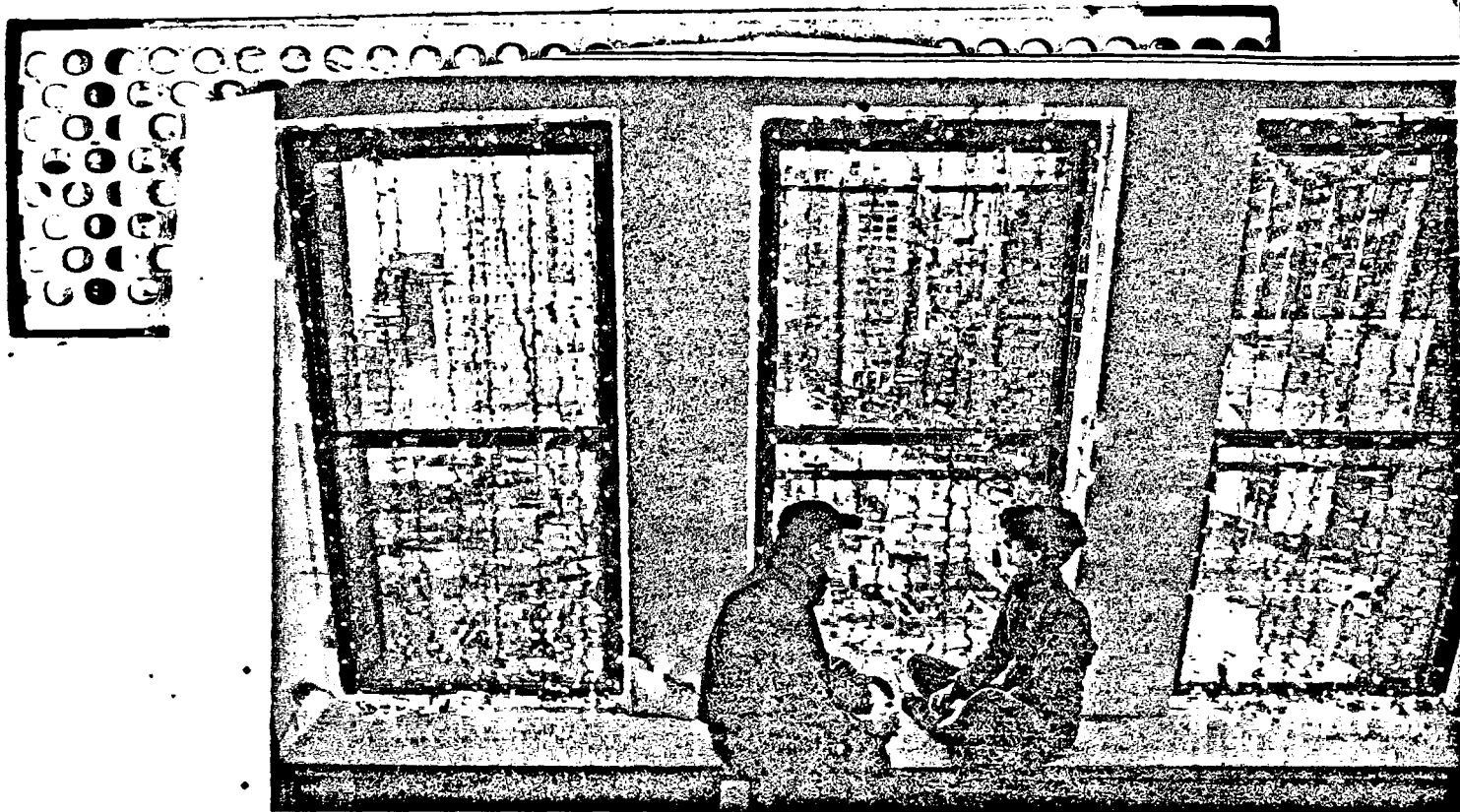




Ozier Muhammad/The New York Times

Kyle Brooks and Elena del Rivero in their eighth-floor loft overlooking the site of the World Trade Center.

A Bittersweet Homecoming at Ground Zero

By RANDAL C. ARCHIBOLD

The Christmas lights twinkle in the windows of her apartment at 125 Cedar Street, a glittering white curtain that hides the present and evokes the past.

Elena del Rivero strung them up a couple of weeks ago in her eighth-floor loft overlooking ground zero. She wanted to celebrate the season and, after 15 months of endless delay and cleaning and anxiety, she wanted to herald her return to the building she and her fellow tenants fled after the terrorist attack on the World

125 CEDAR STREET:

Home at Last

Trade Center.

But the lights are not solely festive. They prevent Ms. Del Rivero from staring out at what she euphemistically calls "this" — the deep void, the churning construction machinery, the blaring stadium lights, the memories of the nearly 3,000 lost souls across the street.

And she hopes they satisfy a long-

ing for what was, the glittering 110-story giants whose office windows cast a welcome, entrancing glow in her living room. She plans to keep the Christmas lights up year-round.

"I didn't want to see outside so much," Ms. Del Rivero, an artist, said the other day as movers hauled her belongings back into her apartment. "I wanted to have the light like we had before, from the towers."

After 15 months, it is finally time to return to 125 Cedar Street, to live

Continued on Page B6

CITY

Bittersweet Homecoming Next to Ground Zero

Continued From Page A1

day, side by side, with ground in a neighborhood at once e and familiar.

residents of the squat turn-of-tury loft building confront return with a welter of emotion—anxiety, sadness, joy, longing—past, but mainly relief. Many huffed from one temporary tent to the next, adrift in a city d on the dead. They entered cted negotiations with their rd, and later city and state nmental officials, over the ng of the building.

residents shoveled out reams ers and building parts blown eir spaces when the planes hit e towers fell. But most of the nents, especially those with facing windows overlooking y Street, were coated in a fine a some cases several inches Many residents threw out fur-and clothes they deemed hope-contaminated, and the dozen s who live in the building sought ve their damaged works re-l, with mixed results.

building was finally declared or habitation on Nov. 16, but the rd and the tenants have had to walls, ceilings and floors dam-by emergency workers, con-rs and a series of plumbing es. There is still no phone serv-me residents say their apart-s will not be ready until next 1, though some pushed to get in e Christmas.

but a few tenants in the 23-unit ng plan to return, but being , they are learning, does not ease eir anxiety about returning to a harged with emotion and under ny from city planners and devel-, not to mention tourists.

spite an assurance to the con-from the Lower Manhattan De-ment Corporation, the resi-cannot help wonder if the build-

ing will ultimately be condemned in the name of redevelopment. Rumors circulate that the heavily damaged Deutsche Bank skyscraper next door, draped in black protective netting, will have to be demolished, though a company spokeswoman said its fate had not been determined.

And there is the effect on the psyche, the tinge of sadness that comes from living so close to where so many died. The lingering fears over whether the air is truly safe.

An electric air filter hums in Gail Langsner's living room on the 12th floor. She moved back last week, and spent an angst-filled first night.

"I was lying there thinking, Is the air toxic? Have I been a fool?" said Ms. Langsner, who runs a parrot-care service from her apartment and had fled the collapsing towers with several birds.

Michael Mulhern, a painter on the ninth floor, has moved almost all of his artwork and belongings back in. But he has yet to spend the night for reasons he cannot articulate.

"It's been such a long time," he said. "Maybe I'm a little nervous."

Peter Wheelwright, Eliza Hicks and their three children moved back yesterday. But not before they renovated part of their apartment. It would have been difficult to return to the same old place, Ms. Hicks said, with memories of Sept. 11.

"Coming back now," she said, "feels like a fresh start."

Nobody, not the residents, the landlord or city officials, has an easy explanation for why it has taken so long.

For several months after Sept. 11, police refused access to the building but for brief visits. Then came protracted negotiations over how thoroughly the apartments should be cleaned. The federal Environmental Protection Agency, which had not had standards for indoor air quality in residential buildings, developed strict standards.

The City Department of Environ-

125 Cedar Street

Articles in this series are examining life at 125 Cedar Street in the aftermath of the World Trade Center attack. Earlier articles in the series are online at nytimes.com/nyregion.

mental Protection carried out the cleanup, using the E.P.A.'s standards and guidelines. It has now cleaned and tested 813 apartments in Lower Manhattan, but Christopher O. Ward, the commissioner, called 125 Cedar the worst.

"Here, we had this building that was sort of the poster child for debris and damage," he said.

It was one of three residential buildings that had remained vacant since the attack, all on the same block on the south rim of ground zero. At 114 Liberty Street, a nine-unit condominium building next door to Cedar that was pierced by pieces of debris, the owners are embroiled in a dispute with insurers over repairs and cleanup. And at 110 Liberty, a 12-unit building recently cleaned by the city, a few tenants have begun returning and the landlord is seeking new tenants.

But the residents of 125 Cedar have been the most vocal in reclaiming their building, which they rehabilitated themselves a quarter-century ago in one of the first office buildings to convert to residences in the financial district.

Part of it is the below-market rents of \$800 to \$1,500 for high-ceilinged apartments up to 2,000 square feet, many with a wall of windows that faced the World Trade Center.

But there was also the sweat equity they put in when they originally rented their places and did much of the renovation themselves.

Now, the sounds of banging and

drilling echo through the halls as contractors continue repairs, an echo of the past. The elevators break down repeatedly. Not all of the hallways and the landings have been painted; still visible in some places are the bright orange markings the Fire Department painted to denote that the building had been inspected.

Peter Davies and Mark Scherzer, who also moved back yesterday, still have a twisted piece of metal from the trade center on their rooftop terrace. The begonias swept with ash from the collapse have grown back oddly, with leaves curled instead of flat and shorter stalks.

Asked when they thought life in the building would be back to normal, Mr. Scherzer replied, "What's normal?" Though relieved to return home, Mr. Scherzer said "thinking about coming back has made me think about Sept. 11 all over again."

Mr. Wheelwright and Ms. Hicks said they were elated to be home. The Christmas tree stand was in place, awaiting the tree they would get today. Christmas gifts were packed up in moving boxes. Mesa, their golden retriever, dozed on the floor.

But as they took a break from unpacking they could not stanch a feeling that they were still displaced, still not quite home.

"This is a non-Christmas for us," said Mr. Wheelwright, chairman of the architecture program at the Parsons School of Design.

"To me it feels as if in some ways the tape has just started to roll again," he added. "I feel like we have been on pause for all this time, like we have been in some kind of suspended animation. Everything else in my life, my professional life, has zoomed ahead. But not home."

He said he was particularly pleased that none of the conceptual plans released last week for the trade center site called for the removal of his building; under one plan, however, a wing of an office tower would soar some 40 stories over the rooftop.

But the residents are still suspicious of developers and find it hard to believe planners would save their little home. Even if 125 Cedar remains, some residents believe any kind of monumental building would attract terrorists again.

"I don't want to be another target," said Pat Moore, whose third-floor apartment was heavily damaged.

Ms. Del Rivero spent a harrowing afternoon last week as the elevators broke down with several of her art pieces stuck inside.

To calm her nerves, she lay on shelving along the windows sparkling with her lights. While her husband, Kyle Brooks, a preservation photographer, excitedly waits to watch the transformation of ground zero, Ms. Del Rivero, a visual artist who uses paint and paper as her medium, has already decided to move her studio space away from the window. They will begin living here on New Year's Day, when the lease on their sublet runs out.

She ran her fingers over the lights and took a glimpse out the window and sighed, thinking about resuming life here, next to ground zero. She searched for words to explain her feelings and after a long pause came up with this: "It affects my soul."



Ozler Muhammad/The New York Times

Michael Mulhern, a painter, has moved almost all of his artwork and belongings back into his ninth-floor apartment. But he has yet to spend the night. "It's been such a long time," he said. "Maybe I'm a little nervous."