

Uneven Treatment

Near Trade Center, Stark Disparities Emerge in Cleanups

Lax Government Leadership
Leaves Some Residences
With Asbestos Concerns

Companies Spend to Refurbish

By MOTOKO RICH
And SUSAN WARREN

NEW YORK—In the eight months that Steve Stewart and his 4,000 colleagues at American Express Co. were exiled from their offices after Sept. 11, a lot was going on in the company's headquarters across the street from the World Trade Center site. Cleaners vacuumed thick layers of dust and debris that had blown into the 51-story tower through shattered windows. Specialists tested for 120 contaminants, including asbestos, lead and mercury. Mr. Stewart returned in June to a pristine office, with a new chair, computer and gray-and-blue carpeting. American Express, the 32-year-old manager says, "did what it needed to do to alleviate people's fears."

A few blocks away, Sudhir Jain had a different experience. The freelance technology consultant moved back to his apartment five blocks south of Ground Zero only two weeks after Sept. 11. His living room was still covered by gray dust. The owner of the 208-unit residential building denied tenants' requests to hire a cleaning contractor, Mr. Jain says, so he hired his own. Confused about what sort of testing would be appropriate, he didn't do any. "We have been left to fend for ourselves to protect our own health and safety," says Mr. Jain, 40.

Nearly a year after the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks destroyed the Twin Towers and unleashed a massive cloud of debris on lower Manhattan, the continuing cleanup presents a stark case of haves and have-nots. The biggest corporate tenants and landlords have conducted pricey cleanups, costing millions of dollars each. But until recently, government agencies at all levels failed to mount a centralized campaign of scrubbing and testing indoor spaces. As a result, many residential buildings, schools and small businesses have received only spotty attention.

Even without firm government guidance, many large companies and landlords "were quick to spend a lot of money, upgrade filtration systems and bring in experts," says Hugh Kaufman, a policy analyst at the Environmental Protection Agency's headquarters in Washington. But lacking official coordination—including from his own agency—many smaller landlords

at corners, Mr. Kaufman adds. "I give the private sector tremendous kudos. I give the public sector an F-minus."

Mr. Jain's landlord at 50 Battery Place, the DeMatteis Organization, says through a spokesman that it told tenants to hire their own cleaners and submit bills for possible reimbursement by the owner's insurance company. Only a handful—Mr. Jain isn't among them—have submitted such bills, the spokesman says. Those claims are still being sorted out.

Public-health experts say that, so far, they haven't identified any long-term serious health risks from the disaster. But that view assumes effective outdoor and indoor cleanups of asbestos and other toxins. And while health studies continue, the experts stress they don't know yet

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whether the combination of substances produced by the unprecedented calamity will cause illnesses in the future. "We just don't know, but if you don't get [buildings] cleaned, obviously there will be a higher probability" of long-term risk, says Paul J. Lioy, associate director of the Environmental and Occupational Health Sciences Institute, which is supported by the University of Medicine and Dentistry of New Jersey and Rutgers University. He is working on a study of residents near Ground Zero.

Free-for-All

The main blame for the helter-skelter indoor cleanup of downtown Manhattan—a triangular area at the island's southern end where 200,000 people live and work—can be traced to the shuffling of responsibility among government agencies. In the days after Sept. 11, the Federal Emergency Management Agency assigned the EPA to monitor outdoor air, clear debris and dust and handle hazardous waste removed from the disaster site. New York City assumed control over indoor areas, including apartments. But the city's Department of Environmental Protection delegated to landlords and residents the job of actually cleaning up and testing. What followed was a free-for-all.

City officials distributed sketchy guidelines but did little to enforce them. The recommendations included, for example, wiping down surfaces with a wet rag but didn't specify how to tell if potential hazards had been eliminated.

EPA officials in New York say they didn't take the initiative indoors because neither FEMA nor New York City asked it to. Bonnie Bellow, an EPA spokeswoman in New York, says the regional office had its hands full for months focusing on the outdoor cleanup. "As the outdoor conditions began to improve, and it became clear that there was confusion and concern about any residual dust that might remain in people's homes, we proceeded with the development of a plan for cleaning up dust indoors," Ms. Bellow says.

For its part, FEMA says it deferred to the EPA. "We were waiting for them to tell us there was a problem with indoor air quality," says Brad Gair, the senior FEMA official on the scene. Geoffrey Ryan, a spokesperson with the city's DEP, says his agency "worked cooperatively from day one with EPA." The city advised landlords they had to clean buildings according to a "strict protocol," Mr. Ryan says. "If there was a problem, we reviewed it."

Beginning last fall, the EPA came under escalating pressure from residents and local politicians who argued that as the country's premier environmental agency, it ought to oversee all cleaning. In May, eight months after Sept. 11, the EPA finally responded by offering to remove any asbestos from 30,000 residences in lower Manhattan. That work will begin in September.

But to get a cleanup, tenants or owners must ask the EPA to come in. That means while one apartment may be cleaned, the nearby elevator shaft or unit next door may not, creating the possibility of recontamination. The agency will clean hallways and lobbies only if asked by a landlord. The EPA isn't offering to clean small businesses or schools.

Neighborhood Watch

The community around the former World Trade Center site features a mix of businesses, residences and schools.



So far, residents in 3,160 apartments—a little more than 10% of those eligible—have asked for EPA help. Mr. Jain is one of those, but he worries his building won't get a thorough overall treatment. "We should be getting a proper asbestos cleanup like the corporate tenants are getting," he says.

In addition to American Express, companies such as Merrill Lynch & Co., Bank of New York Co., Royal Bank of Canada and Dow Jones & Co., publisher of this newspaper, say they have cleaned and tested extensively. The potentially dangerous substance of greatest concern is asbestos, a fibrous material used in fire

newsroom director for the Independent Association of Publishers' Employees, says, "People have been reassured by the results of the testing on our own space so far, but they remain wary about conditions elsewhere in our building and in neighboring buildings." Melissa Coley, a spokeswoman for Brookfield Properties Corp., owner of the Dow Jones building, says, "We have directly addressed the concerns of all of our tenants and continue to monitor the air quality in our buildings."

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retardant in the Trade Center that can cause lung disease and cancer if there is exposure for a period of years. Others include pulverized cement and glass, which can cause respiratory problems, and lead and mercury from incinerated computers and lighting, which can cause nervous-system damage.

To eliminate asbestos, big companies have stripped out carpets, cubicle walls, ceiling tiles and upholstered furniture. American Express says it threw out enough furniture and floor covering to fill a football field piled five feet high. RBC Capital Markets, a unit of Royal Bank of Canada, which occupies five floors of a black tower on the eastern edge of the Trade Center site, says it even vacuumed hundreds of thousands of individual pieces of paper.

Wall Street Journal employees began returning to the Dow Jones offices adjacent to the Trade Center site in late July. Tom Lauricella, a Journal reporter and

owns the lower housing RBC Capital Markets, says it installed filter systems to block more than 95% of particles measuring one micron or larger. The same was done at many other large commercial buildings in the vicinity. Before Sept. 11, the standard for corporate offices was between 60% and 85%.

By contrast, at Stuyvesant High School, four blocks north of Ground Zero, the New York City Department of Education upgraded classroom filters to block fewer than 40% of such tiny particles. Students had moved back into the large, academically elite public school in October, two months before the filters were improved and while trucks were still ferrying dusty debris to barges in the Hudson River just 50 yards away.

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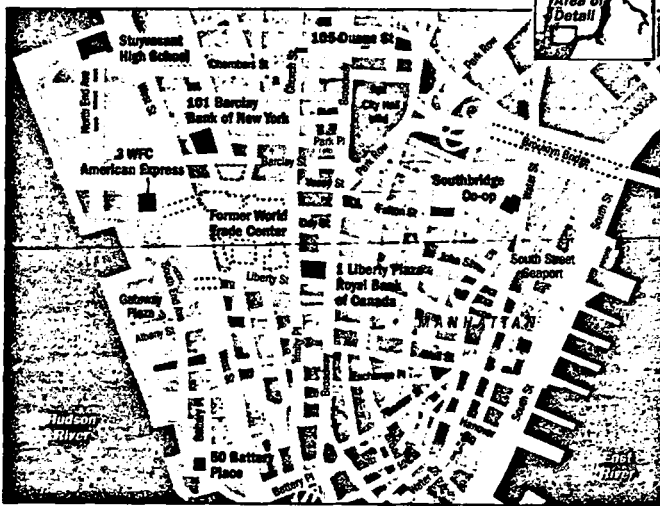
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