NYC 9/11 Public Portal Document

NEWSDAY, THURSDAY, SEPTEMBER 20, 2001

They Can't Go Home Again

By Hugo Kugiya
STAFF WRITER

Pulling suitcases, duffel bags slung over shoulders and plastic garbage sacks knotted around wrists, they arrived with police and National Guard escorts at their sides. They spoke of fleeing a place where the sweetest lavender in the city once grew, where woman and child walked spotless streets with no fear at any hour of the night, where the paint on park benches was always fresh, and the air they breathed was delivered daily from the Hudson River.

This Utopia called Battery Park City is the bedroom of Ground Zero, an evacuated neighborhood of 9,000 residents next to the former World Trade Center, a community built on the earth excavated for the construction of the towers. Built from scratch, planned by a state-formed authority, the community is often called a city within a city, somewhat cut off from the rest of Manhattan.

Residents say that's what they liked about it.

On its coddled sidewalks, on its pristine esplanade, you could easily imagine that you lived in Portland, Ore., or Santa Barbara, Calif., until you glanced over your shoulder at the silver giants that confirmed you were in fact a New Yorker, and among its luckiest.

"What appealed to us was living somewhere brand new," said Udayan Gupta, who lived on the 10th floor of 600 Gateway Plaza with his wife, Kathleen. "It was an adventure starting from scratch."

His building was among the most badly damaged in the attack on the nearby World Trade Center. His unit took the worst of it. From his now windowless living room, he can see the debris perfectly, red flags marking human remains.

On Sept. 11, it rained steel and concrete here. Needless to say, the flower beds did not survive, although the buildings, for the most part, did. But in the interest of the rescue effort, the investigation and the removal of debris, the residents have been forbidden from reoccupying their homes. Officials have not set a date for the evacuation order to end. Residents have been told to prepare for a wait of a month or more.

The displacement of 9,000 people would be a story in itself under any other circumstances. While glad to be alive, and fully aware that their problems are easily eclipsed by the problems of the relatives of the missing, they have admitted to feeling marginalized, overlooked and forgotten. Message boards at the community's official Web site, batteryparkcity.org, are filled with such sentiments:

"It made me sick to hear our mayor . . . talk at length about the restaurant business and Broadway attendance and NOTHING about the people who used to live in Battery Park City," one read.

"I lost friends in the disaster as well and don't even have the comfort of being able to go home at night or sleep in my own bed," read another.

This week they were allowed into their apartments for 20 to 30 minutes at a time to retrieve belongings. They had to show photo identification, keys and some kind of bill.

Most have retrieved just what they could easily and quickly take in a strange sort of shopping spree.

"You don't have much time," said Jessica Golden, who lives on Rector Street. "It was like robbing your own apartment."

Golden also made off with her grandmother's silver.

To many in the city, the World Trade Center was a landmark. To many in the country and around the world, it was an icon. But to the residents of Battery Park City, the buildings were part of the neighborhood. They shopped in the mall below the towers, attended concerts in the plaza, let their dogs sip water from the plaza's fountain and took visiting friends and relatives to the rooftop promenade on Tower Two.

"For us," Gupta said, "the towers were part of our identity."

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