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One Liberty Plaza will reopen Monday

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The stampede, one of several in the days after the Twin Towers fell, began late one night when someone working at Ground Zero started yelling, "Oh my God, oh my God. Go! Go! Go!"

What looked like hundreds of people started running east toward Broadway. Workers ripped off dust masks and dropped buckets where they stood. Others tripped over them as they fled.

GROUND ZERO

A police sergeant collapsed and passed out. Debris had dropped from a neighboring building, triggering the panic.

That building was One Liberty Plaza.

The unadorned, black, 54-story office building, reported more than once to have collapsed, will reopen Monday, its owners said. The rumors of its destruction, it turns out, have been greatly exaggerated.

"To open a building that fell down four times, in just six weeks, is a significant sign of forward progress," said Rick Clark, president of Brookfield Financial Properties, which owns One Liberty as well as 1, 2 and 4 World Financial Center.

Clark said he and what he called a "handful" of tenants will return to the building, which has been deemed structurally sound. A discreet ceremony will mark their return.

Preparing for reoccupation involved replacing more than 600 panes of glass, about one third of the windows on the west side. Dozens of floors had to be cleaned of dust and debris. The exterior is being power-washed. Remarkably, asbestos was not an issue, Clark said.

Though it will be at least one month before most tenants return, the opening of One Liberty, which is located across Church Street from the Trade Center site, is symbolically important, a substantial retaking of part of Ground Zero for the living.

"It's a very important step for this part of the city and the business community there," said Steven Iuco, spokesman for tenant Insignia / ESG, a commercial real estate brokerage. "We're very much committed to the rebirth of that area."

While most tenants speak optimistically about the importance of reoccupying the building, which was used as a staging area for rescuers, they all privately acknowledge the emotional obstacles.

Many will have direct views of Ground Zero and the grisly work. Onlookers and tourists mob the nearby corners for a look. The west side of Broadway is mostly closed off and security promises to remain tight for any building there. The noxious smell can still be overpowering on some days. And there are all the memories to contend with.

Lucille P. Loiselle, who worked on the 23rd floor, cries every time she goes to lower Manhattan.

"You really have to gird your mental loins," she said. "I try not to look. I get angry at people taking pictures. I'm conflicted [about working downtown again]. I know I can be a big girl and go down there. I prefer not to. But if life is there, you got to encourage that life."

The building is home to Goldman Sachs, Reuters, NASDAQ, numerous law offices, banks and insurers. The Brooks Brothers clothing store on the ground floor became a ward for the few wounded and numerous dead, a sad distinction the store tries to wear with pride.

"We didn't have any choice," said company spokeswoman Geri Corrigan. "But we're proud. We've gotten so many letters thanking us."

The store, which was almost completely destroyed only a few months after being renovated, will not reopen until next spring or summer Corrigan said. Some rescue workers sent in payment to Brooks Brothers offices for sweaters or shirts they took from the store. Corrigan said the workers are welcome to keep the clothing and has sent back all the checks except for one anonymous money order.

One of the building's largest tenants, the international law firm of Cleary Gottlieb Steen & Hamilton, plans to move its 1,000 employees during the next four weeks into the nine upper floors it occupied. Most employees have been back more than once to retrieve belongings, escorted by police.

"We're not in any particular hurry," said Michael Ryan, a partner in the firm. "It's an emotional journey as well as a physical one. A lot of us have strong feelings about what we saw. But we'll get back there. Absolutely."

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