

The Survivors' Stairway

Please join our campaign to preserve the stairway that was the last means of escape for many survivors and a desired destination for those who perished on September 11, 2001. The last remnant of the WTC that is still standing above ground right where it was since the day it was built in the 1970s. The WTC Survivors' Network proposes that this stairway remain as a testament of hope, strength and resilience to the thousands who survived that day.

On September 12th, 2001, it survived intact. It's condition is a result of the recovery operations and it is exposed to further damage from the elements.

Overwhelming support for its preservation has poured in from all over the country, and yet , efforts to secure a place for it in it's current place, on the Memorial Plaza, or anywhere in the WTC's 16 acres are being stymied. Parade Magazine, the Sunday Newspaper insert with largest circulation in the country, surveyed its readers and 95% of those responding (13,000) were in favor of preserving the stairs. The many readers submitted and were nothing short of incredulous that the Stairway's preservation was not already assured in the master plan.

There is a consensus that the Stairway has to be moved during construction of Building 2, but we cannot get decision makers to commit to where it will go in that time, how it will be protected, and, most importantly, where it will return to the site. Most disturbing are the prospects that it might be cut up and displayed in pieces. We want it to remain intact, above ground and in it's original location, if at all possible.

For it to remain where it is, the footprint of Building 2 probably has to relocate or change. So far, no one in a position of authority seems to be willing to consider these options, hiding instead behind the "dictates" of the master plan, which was locked down by 2003, more than a year before WTC survivors being aware that the stairway still existed and prior to them gaining a voice in the redevelopment process.

The National Register of Historic Places determined that the entire World Trade Center site to be eligible for the register on March 31, 2004. Unfortunately this was after the adoption of the master plan. Initially, the PATH project was going to impact the staircase and through the Section 106 process, the Port Authority removed it from the project boundaries. It then fell within the overall rebuilding plan and under the Programmatic Agreement that was signed by the LMDC, State Historic Preservation Office, and the Advisory Council. Once it was removed from the PATH project, civic minded planners and preservationists began discussing the Stairway through LMDC's Section 106 meetings. For two years these discussions have led nowhere and then Silverstein unveiled the design for Tower 2, one which does not preserve the Survivors' Stairway.

Other priorities such as security have moved the developers to change the plan, why not for the Stairway? One of the preservationists who was involved, as a member of the

public, with the master planning and Section 106 processes. His comments on the Stairway related to planning efforts in 2003-2004 are paraphrased, below:

The preservationists fought very hard for the Vesey Street staircase and protested when it wasn't listed as a protected feature in the 106 documents. At least one of the residents' groups opposed saving it because they didn't want their children exposed to ruins.

The Vesey Street Stairway was written off by the LMDC and the PA when they refused to include it in the final 106 document (April 22, 2004, Programmatic Agreement, and others). Lumping it in with all the other historic resources misses the point. This is the one surviving artifact that is especially meaningful to the survivors, who have been basically left out of the process completely. The problem with laundry-list requests, of which we have submitted many, is that allows them to cherry-pick. We need them to respond on this one because it was left out.

Survivors' Needs, A Larger Context

Those who survived the attacks of September 11th, 2001 have certain needs. Similar to veterans of combat, survivors often do not ever share their thoughts and feelings about their experiences with anyone who didn't go through similar trauma. Related to this fact is the need survivors have to connect with each other when they are ready to do so and how they see fit. Further, returning to the site is more difficult for survivors than the general public. The public desire is to learn. The survivors' desire is to find peace of mind, and many may seek this by avoiding the site forever. Unlike veterans, WTC survivors do not know their peers and have limited resources available to reconnect to the larger community of survivors. Employers are reluctant to share information, individuals rarely knew anyone in the towers other than their own colleagues and shopkeepers. On 9/11 many survivors experienced trauma in the company of complete strangers. In some cases they own their survival to the deeds and words of these strangers. Wouldn't it be right to be able to connect these people for the second time? Many survivors are reluctant to come forward for a variety of reasons. And yet, they have a need to interconnect.

Those who do return should find a place that acknowledges their experience. This place is not the Memorial, nor is it the Museum, although some survivors may find these places comforting. Still other survivors will return and find affirmation in the redevelopment itself, completely apart from the memorial. Preservation of the Vesey Street Stairway and dedicating it to the survivors is the most fitting example of this place of acknowledgement. That place could be part of the redevelopment as easily as it could be in the Memorial Quadrant. Most agree, however, that integration with the Memorial makes the most sense. Oklahoma City's National Memorial to the victims of the 1995 bombing of the Murrah Building does this in an impressive way.

The Museum's content and telling the story of survival is entirely separate from the place of acknowledgement, similar to the separation of the memorial from the memorial museum. If the Stairway is cut up and portions incorporated in to the museum narrative, that would not serve the needs of survivors. Many survivors are actively supporting the story telling portion of the museum, but that does not serve their need for a place of acknowledgement or renewal.

Finally, those who choose to visit the Memorial Museum should have a place they can go where their inevitable, strong reactions to the content can emerge appropriately without impinging on others or impingement from the public.

Thus, there are at least four separate issues:

- Dedicating a place acknowledging survivors in the 16 acres
- Creating a place in the Museum for survivors to have space for their experiences apart from the public
- Developing museum content that tells all survivors' stories appropriately
- Allowing the survivors' community to connect.