

World Trade Center Survivors' Network, Inc.

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Chairman, Board of Directors
Lower Manhattan Development Corporation
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Mr. Larry A. Silverstein
President
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Seven World Trade Center
250 Greenwich Street, 38th Floor
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Re: Comments on Proposed Mitigation Plan for the Vesey Street Stairway

Dear Sirs:

The following summarizes the views of the World Trade Center Survivors' Network (WTCSN) in regard to the Mitigation Plan for the Vesey Street Survivors' Stairway proposed by the Lower Manhattan Development Corporation (LMDC) on January 11, 2007. The formal proposal of a mitigation plan is a significant milestone for this Section 106 process. Recognizing this, we feel it would be useful to all Consulting Parties if we present our comments on the specific mitigation proposals within the larger context of our views about the importance of the Survivors' Stairway. We hope that in presenting our comments within this structure it can advance a dialog which we feel must take place before any final resolution can be accepted as the product of a fair and thoughtful public process.

The WTCSN feels that too often this Section 106 process has been bogged down in discussions about engineering and cost effectiveness. We feel this is putting the cart in front of the horse. All parties agree that almost anything is possible from an engineering point of view, if you spend enough money. But a discussion of cost effectiveness is meaningless without first discussing what one wants to accomplish. A million dollars spent on a bad idea is a waste of money. But a million dollars spent on a good idea can be a bargain.

We feel that there is necessary antecedent discussion which has never taken place, namely a coming to terms with what is the true importance of the Survivors' Stairway. Put in another way, the purpose of the Section 106 Process is to mitigate damage to our historic resources. To successfully accomplish this goal, the logical first step is to identify what the resource is. The reality is that the Survivors' Stairway is a multifaceted historic resource important for a

variety of reasons. It provides us and future generations with multiple benefits, some of which are overlapping and some competing. A logical approach would be to identify these benefits and prioritize them. We feel that doing so, and comparing the Mitigation Plan against this structure, is the appropriate way to provide comment on these proposals.

What is the Survivors' Stairway?

We all know that the Vesey Street Survivors' Stairway is the last remaining above-ground element of the World Trade Center complex. It has an historic and architectural value as such, which was recognized by the National Trust for Historic Preservation last May when it listed the Stairway on its list of "America's 11 Most Endangered Historic Places."

We also know that the Stairway is historically important because of the vital role it played in saving lives on 9/11. After the collapse of the South Tower, the Vesey Street Stairs became the only safe avenue of escape for many evacuees of the North Tower, as well as anyone on the plaza level. Though we can never know the exact number of evacuees who used the stairs as their final means of escape, the number would certainly have to be in the many hundreds. And it is because of this history that the Vesey Street Stairs have since become known to the general public as the Survivors' Stairway.

In addition to these historic components, the Survivors' Stairway has taken on an equally important significance as a symbol. Images of stairways and stairs are a critical element in the story of September 11th, and the Survivor's Stairway is the only stairway from the complex still remaining. Everyone who escaped that day did so by going down stairs, while firefighters and rescue workers climbed up stairs. Because of these memories, thousands of survivors and the general public at large have attached a symbolic importance to the Stairway. It has become for many thousands a metaphor for all the stairs of the Towers, and in a larger sense a metaphor for survival as well.

There is a certain harmony therefore, between symbolism and history within the Survivors' Stairway, but some dissonance as well. Historic integrity and reference to original location are critical to the value of the Stairway as an historic artifact, while the symbolic value of the Stairway is invested in such concepts as the way its story is told and how it will be displayed. These values are not mutually exclusive. And in fact we would like to state for the record that the WTCSN still feels that the best harmony of historic artifact and symbol would be the location and display of the Survivors' Stairway in its original location. If in fact the full Stairway cannot return to its original location, then reassembling the components that look like a stairway in a spot within the Memorial Grove dedicated to survivors would provide an acceptable alternative. But in any event, all parties have agreed that to allow construction to continue, it must be moved. As a result, no matter what the eventual outcome of this public process, the historic integrity of the Stairway will suffer.

What is the Stairway's "True" Importance?

With this reality as a backdrop, we would respectfully argue that the symbolism of the Survivors' Stairway is now its most important element. Why do we say this?

The unfortunate truth is that when the Stairway is moved from its present location, it will lose its truly unique connection to place, a quality which has been so vital to its importance and appeal as an historic artifact. Once moved, the physical components of the Stairway will become just so many more items on a master list, in danger of being lost among the thousands of 9/11 artifacts already preserved by the Port Authority. Some preservation critics in this Section 106 process have even gone so far as to argue that compared with the multiplicity of other 9/11 relics, the Stairway has no special claims on preservation.

We firmly believe however, that compared with the many thousands of artifacts already preserved in Hanger 17, in the New York State Museum, or anywhere else for that matter, the Survivors' Stairway is truly *sui generis*.

The fact is that most of the artifacts in Hanger 17 were chosen, and derive their importance, either from the particular story they were purposely selected to represent or because they are architecturally recognizable. As such, their importance resides in the artifacts themselves. In contrast to this however, the Survivor's Stairway derives a very large portion of its importance from the significance attached to it by people subsequent to September 11. This sets it apart from any other any other artifact in Hanger 17, with one sole exception. That exception is the "Last Column".

The Stairway and the Last Column

Just as the Last Column's true value as an artifact is the meaning attached to it by the cleanup and recovery workers subsequent to September 11, we would argue that in a similar fashion the larger value of the Survivors' Stairway lies in the symbolism it has become imbued with by survivors and the public at large.

The significance the steelworkers imparted to the Last Column transformed a mundane architectural artifact into a monument dedicated to the memory of all those lost on 9/11. No one would argue that this is not the true value of the Last Column. The Stairway, like the Last Column, is also a genuine WTC artifact. But more significantly it has become transformed through human agency into a monument to all stairs, all survivors, and to survival itself. We would argue that this symbolism is what makes the Stairway such a uniquely important artifact.

The Survivors' Stairway and the Last Column are the only artifacts of which we are aware that combine the historic integrity of the physical object with the broad human experience of September 11, 2001. They are symbolic monoliths standing at opposite ends of a universal spectrum. They remind us of the dualities we all struggle with in the wake of 9/11 – life and death, devastation and renewal, grief and the courage to continue. The importance of preserving the Last Column has always been recognized, and indeed been planned for. Sadly, this has not been the case with the Survivors' Stairway.

The Mitigation Plan

We feel it was important to take the time to parse the historic and symbolic elements of the Survivors' Stairway in order to better understand how the different elements of the Mitigation

Plan fail or succeed in their goal of mitigating damage to the Stairway's value as an historic resource.

Relocating the Stairway

As stated earlier, we do not wish to get sidetracked into a discussion about the costs and feasibility of moving the Stairway as a whole unit, compartmentalized, or the various storage strategies. We freely admit that we are not architects or engineers, and will leave that up to the experts associated with the historic preservation groups as represented in the Section 106 Process. We feel they have proven themselves to be the most knowledgeable about best practices in these areas, and they best represent the common interest of maximizing the historic authenticity of the Stairway within the context of any preservation proposal. Additionally, we are in full support of their efforts to confirm the validity and methodologies of many of the controversial engineering and cost claims presented at recent Section 106 meetings.

Regarding the Port Authority's proposal to separate and preserve only the concrete steps, granite facings and treads from the Stairway, we still feel that as much of the Stairway as possible should be moved in order to maximize the preservation and display possibilities. We would only like to observe that we feel they have successfully identified those elements of the Stairway which are most important symbolically, i.e., those parts of the Stairway that look like a stairway.

Tower Two

As discussed above, the historic value of the Stairway will be augmented by treatments considerate of its historic integrity and referential to its original location, and the value of the Stairway as a symbol will be advanced by a respectful relocation and display. We most strongly feel that the Silverstein Properties (SPI) proposal fails on all accounts.

SPI's proposal to reuse stair treads in the entrance stairway clearly does damage to the historic authenticity of the artifact. Furthermore, the reorientation of the stair treads will mislead and confuse visitors as to the Stairway's original use. On the other hand, their proposal to highlight the outline of the original location of the Stairway within its lobby and entrance stairway is not a bad idea. But we feel this only makes sense as a reference point to some other, more successful, preservation display elsewhere. As the central element of the main preservation strategy, it only adds insult to injury.

Most egregiously however, the SPI proposal does maximum damage to the symbolic value of the Stairway. Carving up a monument to all stairs and all survivors in order to cherry-pick those treads which are the most viable for commercial reuse, borders on the sacrilegious. At the very least, it is certainly tone deaf to what we feel is the true value of this historic resource, as discussed above.

In short, SPI's proposed reuse of stair treads destroys the historic integrity of the artifact, while making only a marginal connection to original location. Furthermore, the proposed reuse damages the Stairway's symbolic value, if not completely disrespecting it.

The Memorial Museum

We feel Alice Greenwald's proposals to incorporate elements of the Stairway into the Memorial Museum are more successful attempts to respect its symbolic character. We judge this based on how the story of the Stairway will most likely be told, where it will be located, and how it will be displayed. The Memorial Museum, through outreach by its website and public meetings, has also made an effort to understand what the public feels about the Survivors' Stairway and it is because of this that we have full confidence in the Museum's understanding of its symbolic importance.

Of the three display proposals made in regard to relocating treads to the Museum Entry Building, we prefer the proposed Option C. It has the benefit of relocating the treads into a structure apart from the Memorial Hall stairway, and we believe that the museum context can provide proper signage and other display elements necessary for the visitor to understand its symbolism.

One aspect of Option C which we don't like however is the apparent lack of height and the two-dimensional aspect of embedding a very small number of the stair treads into an enclosing slope. We realize this was probably unavoidable in a PowerPoint slide. However, we would like to state for the record that any successful display treatment of the Survivors' Stairway must "feel large". We believe that to adequately capture the symbolism of the Stairway, a display must look like a stairway, and be larger than the observer. It is important that it not be perceived as just a collection of steps. Furthermore, a stairway is a three dimensional architectural volume. We think that reassembling a larger number of the Stairway's components within a free standing supporting structure would make a great emotional impact and properly capture its symbolism.

Location is obviously critical as well – which brings us to the proposal to relocate the last tread within a space dedicated to survivors within the Memorial Quadrant.

The WTCSN has always felt that a crucial element of the symbolism of the Survivors' Stairway is that it rest at street level. Historically, survivors ended their flight to safety by emerging from the Stairway at street level. It will be a powerfully emotive part of its narrative, if the visitor is aware that survivors escaped by reaching the very ground he or she is standing on. The Museum's proposal respects this imagery. Furthermore, the proposal captures the symbolic nature of the last tread being a threshold step. It represents the boundary between danger and freedom.

We feel therefore, that the Museum's proposals, if properly executed, will honor the symbolic nature of the Stairway. While certainly not optimal in regard to the historic integrity of the artifact, we all agree that if the Stairway is separated into components and removed from the site, its integrity will have already been irreparably damaged. As stated earlier for the record, we are not happy with this scenario. But we feel that if this must truly be so, then Alice Greenwald's proposals are helpful in maximizing the symbolism of this artifact which we feel is ultimately its most important value.

Suggestions and Summary

The WTCSN feels that a relevant discussion which has never taken place is one that comes to terms with the true value of the Survivors' Stairway. As stated above, we feel this is the symbolism imparted to it by survivors and the public. If true, then instead of talking exclusively about engineering and money, a worthwhile mitigation effort would have initially focused on two other variables: location and display. Engineering should have been secondary.

Without proper location or presentation, the Stairway will simply no longer work as a symbol. It becomes just another artifact, and its larger meaning is lost. Similarly to why one would not want to display the Last Column along side other I-beams in a display about steel remnants, displaying the Stairway in a manner that robs it of its larger human story would do damage to the true value of the artifact. There has always been consensus that the power of the Stairway is maximized if left in its original location. We still agree with this position, but also understand that there are other issues that need to be addressed. However, this understanding should have been the beginning of a conversation and not the end of one.

We feel the SPI proposal has ignored this needed dialogue. Working in a vacuum, apart from the public, its proposals are bereft of symbolism, if not disrespectful of it. The Museum's proposals on the other hand, while not optimal from a historic preservation point of view, advance this conversation and are cognizant of the symbolic importance of the Stairway.

Ideally we would like to see a larger presence for the Stairway at street level, as a tribute to the 25,000 survivors who escaped the Towers, and the rescue and recovery workers, who are also survivors. However, if this is truly not possible, then the Museum's proposals are very moving and worthy of support.

One final point we would like to make is that the proposed Mitigation Plan would give "first choice" of Stairway components to SPI's designers, while the Memorial Museum would come second. For all the reasons discussed above, we believe this would be a tragic mistake. We feel that if alternate above-ground treatments for the Survivors' Stairway cannot be arrived at, the Museum should get sole access to its deconstructed components. To date, only the Museum has demonstrated an understanding of their symbolic importance.

Respectfully yours,

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Cc:

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