

Stuck in the Present Tense, Pointing to the Twin Towers

By DAVID W. DUNLAP

While "World Trade Center" signs around the new PATH station startled commuters and visitors this week, a smaller but even more poignant graphic remnant of the past was hiding in plain sight across Church Street.

"What has 200 elevators, 1,200 restrooms, 40,000 doorknobs, 200,000 lighting fixtures, 7 million square feet of acoustical tile ceilings, more structural steel than the Verrazano Narrows Bridge — and was built for a final cost of over one billion 1970s dollars?" asks the colorful sign between seven-foot cast-iron posts, outside Century 21, near the corner of Cortlandt Street.

"That's right, the World Trade Center."

Just over there. Where all that remains is sky.

Rebuked by the rawness of ground zero, the sign continues ebulliently:

"Now, every weekday, 50,000 people come to work in 12 million square feet of office, hotel and commercial space in the seven buildings in this city-within-a-city, where they are joined by 80,000 visitors passing through an enormous interior shopping mall."

"As many as 10,000 visitors in a single day ride the non-stop express elevators — from the lobby to the 107th floor in 82 seconds — to take in the spectacular views of the city and its surroundings," the sign concludes.

The trade center sign was one of 42 markers highlighting points of interest around Lower Manhattan, installed six years ago by a nonprofit group called Heritage Trails New York. They were written by Anthony Robins, an architectural historian and the author of "The World Trade Center" (Pineapple Press and Omnigraphics, 1987).

It is the only one of those historical signs that history overtook. And it seems to have survived for the last two years in part because it was forgotten.

Mr. Robins said this week that he had not known the sign was still standing. A spokeswoman for Century 21, which helped sponsor the sign originally, said, "This is the first time it was brought to our attention."

And Carl Weisbrod, president of the Alliance for Downtown New York, which has taken over maintenance of the Heritage Trails mark-

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Michael Nagler for The New York Times

A historical marker on Church Street, installed six years ago, still says that 50,000 people work at the World Trade Center and as many as 10,000 people a day visit.

ers, said his organization was only now focusing on the fate of this particular sign.

Should it remain in place, unrevised, as a kind of poignant memorial by default? Or should it be updated to serve those who rely on the site markers for current information? Is it too precious to risk outside, better suited to a new location like a museum or perhaps the World Trade Center PATH station?

"We don't know yet," Mr. Weisbrod said. What he did say was that the sign would stay in place at least a year while the alliance planned the future of the Heritage Trail markers.

That will give passers-by the chance to reflect, with Mr. Robins, on the lost innocence embodied in his text.

"It was a symbol of that unbridled postwar optimism that you could turn around a city by building this incredible structure," Mr. Robins said in an interview. "It's so New York. Count all those tiles! Count all those pipes! Marvel at what's possible. And now — marvel at how hard it was to put together and how many minutes it took to take it down. It's inconceivable."

He paused. "It's not inconceivable. But it ought to be."