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Unbuilding a Skyscraper Wounded on Sept. 11

By **JAMES BARRON**

It is, Avi Schick said, like watching a video of a building being built, but in reverse.

Mr. Schick, the chairman of the Lower Manhattan Development Corporation, was walking through 130 Liberty Street, the building opposite ground zero that was gashed by pieces of the World Trade Center on Sept. 11, 2001. The building, the New York base of Deutsche Bank at the time, is now being dismantled.

That is different from being demolished. The building is being taken apart almost piece by piece, something demolition experts say has been done before.

What is a first is the complete removal of a building so large and so badly contaminated by hazardous substances. And it is happening under the wary eyes of regulators, neighbors and even the Wall Street types who will someday fill the building that is scheduled to take this one's place.

So, day after day this summer, workers with acetylene torches are going floor by floor, slicing through the steel beams, the horizontal parts of the building's skeleton. With help from small tractorlike machines, they are pulling down the beams and the steel columns they are attached to.

Then they are cutting the beams and columns into smaller pieces and loading them into trash-hauling bins that a crane lowers to the street.

Working their way down from the top of what was once a 41-story building, the workers reached the 26th floor on Tuesday morning.

They were cutting into the beams at the southwest corner of that floor, and the two-and-a-half-inch-thick concrete floor slab was vibrating. That was because a mechanical excavator — another tractorlike machine, with a jackhammer mounted on a movable front arm — was breaking through the slab on the southeast corner.

The broken pieces went into another trash-hauling bin and the crane took them away, too. The workers can dismantle one floor every four days or so.

A separate team is working its way through the building, removing the interiors and scrubbing away any contaminants that may remain.

Consultants to the development corporation said more than two years ago that besides asbestos, the building had excessive levels of seven hazardous substances, including dioxin, lead and chromium.

Now those floors have been reduced to their structural elements: naked columns and beams. The walls that once defined offices are gone. So are the plate-glass windows that once looked out on the trade center across

the street. So are the wires that connected computers and phones and brought in electricity.

And there was the continuing search for human remains. The chief medical examiner's office said in February that 766 body parts had been found in the building. Most were fragments of bone less than four inches long.

The long-delayed project got under way in earnest in February. A large construction company, Bovis Lend Lease, won a contract worth \$82 million to clear the site, and before that, there was a court fight between Deutsche Bank and its insurers that ended after former Senator [George J. Mitchell](#) was called in as a mediator.

The solution was for the development corporation, which is controlled jointly by the state and the city, to buy the building for \$90 million.

The federal [Environmental Protection Agency](#) approved the plan for dismantling the building last September after reviewing methods for keeping contaminants from being released into the air during the deconstruction.

The E.P.A. action came two months after a deputy commissioner for the city Department of Environmental Protection, Robert C. Avaltroni Jr., began leading meetings every other week with city and state officials and officials from the regional office of the E.P.A. to deal with issues raised by the project. Those meetings continued as Gov. [George E. Pataki](#) left office and Gov. [Eliot Spitzer](#) took over.

Finally, crews began driving what are called needle beams into the facade. The needle beams anchored the scaffolding, which obscured the building as the interior decontamination, including a top-to-bottom wipe-down, began.

Soon the crews were removing the floor-to-ceiling windows and replacing them with plywood.

Then the project slowed down again, as Bovis and the John Galt Corporation negotiated with the development corporation. They said they wanted an extra \$30 million because the project turned out to be more complicated than they had expected it to be. Mr. Schick said the development corporation agreed to advance a total of \$38 million toward the cost of finishing the job, with the exact amount to be negotiated — or litigated — later.

What is happening at 130 Liberty Street is certainly different from most demolition projects, where the process is less methodical and the rubble a jumble of steel, concrete, plaster and glass. In some ways, the Deutsche Bank building looks more like a construction site than a demolition site. Scaffolding runs up the outside of the building, as do elevators that are little more than lifts with perforated walls.

On the upper floors, where Mr. Schick and David Emil, the president of the Lower Manhattan Development Corporation, led their tour, the work is being done by people in hard hats.

That was a sign of progress. The last time a reporter and a photographer were allowed in the building, they had to wear respirators and body suits.

This time, on the 26th floor, there was a grid of steel beams where the floor slab had been removed. And

there was the part of the slab that Mr. Schick and Mr. Emil could still walk on, even as the excavator pounded the concrete. "In about 36 months," Mr. Schick said, "there will be some banker here."

He and Mr. Emil are determined to finish the disassembly to clear the way for a new building that will house JPMorgan Chase's investment banking headquarters. "JPMorgan Chase is making a huge bet on our ability to do that," Mr. Schick said.

Mr. Emil said the removal of the Deutsche Bank building would be finished in "late winter" — that is, in early 2008. But the deal for the additional money for Bovis and John Galt included a bonus if they finish by Dec. 31.

The deconstruction has had its problems. In May, a 22-foot-long metal pipe fell from the 35th floor and smashed through the roof of a nearby firehouse. No one was seriously hurt, but the deconstruction work was halted for about a week while the city reviewed safety precautions.

Mr. Schick said that a Buildings Department inspector is assigned to the building full time, as are inspectors from the E.P.A. and the state Labor Department, who are checking for environmental hazards. He said the work could be halted if they found unexpected debris the size of a dime — in a space not quite as large as an acre.

Twelve monitors that check air quality have been mounted on or near the building.

The last time one went off, Mr. Schick said, it was caused by drilling by Con Edison that had nothing to do with the project.

"This building is unique," said Mr. Avaltroni, the city environmental official. "It was severely damaged, it had the gash, it had not been dealt with for a period of time, and if you look at it symbolically, it's very important to get it down. The main objective here is do it right, get it done."

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