

The Height of Ambition: Part Six

September 8, 2002

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By JAMES GLANZ and ERIC LIPTON

Irving R. Boody & Company, exporter of rosin and paraffin to South America and importer of fatty acids from Germany and Denmark, finished moving into Room 1163 on the 11th floor of the north tower on Dec. 16, 1970. Down one flight, in Room 1019, Export-Import Services was setting up its freight-forwarding and custom-house-brokerage business. It was opening day, but there was no ribbon cutting, no speeches. Just the sound of riveting and the shouts of men still working to complete the towers as a secretary hung pictures on the wall and a trader reviewed invoices at his new desk. Construction workers were everywhere. "Don't get hit by a hammer," Irving Boody Jr. recalls yelling.

The World Trade Center was finally coming to life. But the twin mountains emerging on the Hudson shoreline were so grand -- so almost supernaturally giant -- that the master builders could not control the daily twists and turns.

To start with, the delays caused by strikes by the tugboat crews and elevator constructors meant that very little space was ready at the end of 1970. Irving R. Boody and Export-Import were both the beginning and the end of the opening-day tenant list: 30 employees occupying less than one-tenth of 1 percent of the trade center's promised 10 million square feet. And these pioneers had to enter this strangely empty and isolated city through a plywood tunnel, like steers going through a cattle chute. The Port Authority's unparalleled public-relations machine did what it could to convince skeptics that the flow of international trade was suddenly being diverted once again through Lower Manhattan. But as the weeks and months progressed, it seemed as if the Port Authority had erected a "vast white elephant," as one of the authority's own commissioners put it, rather than a temple of international commerce. The economic conditions of the day certainly didn't help. The Port Authority had the bad luck to hold the dedication ceremony for the towers in April 1973, just before the OPEC oil crisis sent the global economy, and international trade, into one of its worst slumps in modern times. The trade center started life as a giant money loser, running annual deficits of \$10 million to \$15 million.

Filling the empty space was not the only challenge. The Port Authority, in these early years, was hard pressed to ensure the safety of the thousands of office workers slowly moving in. Even before the towers opened, there was a series of small fires, inspiring questions from city firefighters about just how safe the buildings would be in a major fire. (As a bi-state agency, the Port Authority was exempt from city fire codes.) A midnight blaze in February 1975, which should have been merely a nuisance, turned into a debacle. The fire, set by a custodian turned arsonist, started on the 11th floor of the north tower and over three hours spread up and down into six other floors.

The blaze exposed two major weaknesses in the center's fire-protection systems: there were no sprinklers in the building to extinguish the fire -- as was true in most high-rises of the day -- and critical fireproofing was missing, allowing burning utility wires to spread the fire between the floors. What's more, the tower's core acted like a chimney, sending great

plumes of smoke upward. There was no threat that the building would collapse, but it was an early warning sign of just how unpredictable a fire in the sky could be. If it hadn't occurred in the middle of the night, Fire Commissioner John T. O'Hagan later wrote, "the rescue problem would have been tremendous."

The 1974 disaster epic "The Towering Inferno" came out just as the fear of fire in the trade center was escalating, and soon enough the comparisons started. State employees assigned to the south tower were so disturbed that they formed a team of building- and fire-code experts to put the towers under the microscope. The result was not encouraging, says Gennaro Fischetti, then a judge with the state Workers' Compensation Board, who organized the team and then turned over a list of 38 violations to the city Fire Department.

In the spring of 1975, the chairman of the State Senate Labor Committee held a news conference in front of the trade center, calling the potential for a high-rise office-building disaster "stupefying beyond description" and charging that fire posed a "clear and potential danger" to the tens of thousands of people taking up residence in the World Trade Center. Recognizing that it had both a public-relations and a potential public-safety problem on its hands, the Port Authority moved to address the inferno fears. At first its engineers tried to figure out a way to use air pressure to keep smoke from accumulating in stairwells, so at least they would be clear in a fire. But they found that the system would not work in the trade center, partly because there were just too many doors that could be opened, releasing air pressure. So they decided that sprinklers would be needed, a job, one official joked, that would "eat up every mile of copper pipe east of the Mississippi." They were installed slowly, over a period of more than a decade, at a cost of \$45 million. Yet in 2001, on the day they were put to the ultimate test, they were completely disabled.

As the Port Authority was struggling to ease the public's concerns about fire, a different and more terrifying specter arrived without warning, from the direction of the Statue of Liberty. Late on the night of Feb. 20, 1981, an Aerolineas Argentinas Boeing 707, flying in the clouds on its way to Kennedy Airport, improperly descended to an altitude lower than the tip of the north tower's television mast -- and on a course straight for the tower. The 58 passengers and crew members were less than 90 seconds from the towers when an altitude radar alarm sounded in the air-traffic-control facility. "Argentine 342!" the air-traffic controller said frantically. "Climb! Climb immediately!" It was such a close call that the controller on duty went out on traumatic-injury leave.

But, somehow, in the midst of these frightening episodes and continuing money troubles, a turnaround took place. It is hard to pinpoint the exact moment or cause, but the most outsize giant in a city of superlatives gradually began to seem more human in scale. Philippe Petit certainly helped start that process. His high-wire walk between the buildings one morning in August 1974 proved to the world that a slender 24-year-old man in black tights and ballet shoes could stand taller than the towers themselves.

Owen Quinn, a Queens skydiver, parachuted from the north-tower roof. George Willig, a toymaker outfitted with nylon rope and metal clamps, pulled himself up the south tower's face, along the window-washing tracks, as crowds watched from below. Each new stunt seemed to bring the buildings closer to human proportions. And when the observation deck opened atop the south tower in 1975, tourists and locals alike were able to get the ultimate bird's-eye view of the metropolis 1,377 feet below.

This access to the sky softened the towers' haughty air. But it was the

gradual financial success of the complex -- and its rise as a center of money and commerce -- that finally brought it respect worldwide. Banks, insurance companies and Wall Street firms were drawn to the trade center, allowing the Port Authority to double, triple and then more than quadruple rents. The trade center turned its first profit in 1981, and Tozzoli was at last able to declare, "For all practical purposes, we are full." The last piece of the project, the 47-story tower at 7 World Trade Center, started going up in 1984. Tozzoli's brainchild, Battery Park City, bloomed next door. TriBeCa flourished. David Rockefeller's dream of reviving Lower Manhattan had certainly come true -- in large part because of the trade center's presence.

Even in the midst of the trade center's success, life there was never without an undercurrent of apprehension. Whenever the gusts would get going, despite Robertson's shock absorbers, the towers would sway back and forth. On especially windy days -- as the steel creaked like a ship at sea, the elevator cables slapping against each building's core -- there was nervous laughter among the tenants near the top. People hung makeshift pendulums from their ceilings to watch the motion.

There were constant reminders of how unnaturally high the thousands of office workers climbed each day -- elevators went haywire, briefly going into free fall or overshooting a floor, even causing broken bones and lacerations. Some people refused to go near windows; others simply disliked the lengthy transit from their desks to the ground. And for many who worked there, the thought of a disaster still lingered. "I would liken it to living in the earthquake zone in California," recalls Lawrence Huntington, the retired president of Fiduciary Trust, which lost 87 employees on Sept. 11. "Intellectually, you know someday a serious earthquake might come right under your living room. But you keep on going ahead with your life."

True terror would not come until Feb. 26, 1993, at 12:17 p.m. Frank Lombardi, the Port Authority engineer, was in an elevator with eight other passengers when suddenly the car lurched to a halt and soon after went dark. As black soot and smoke seeped into the elevator, Lombardi and his fellow passengers forced open the doors and then spent four hours, with the sharp edges of keys and the door from the elevator's electrical panel, carving a hole through the adjacent wall, using tiny lights on their beepers to guide their work.

Even for those not stuck in elevators, the trip out of the buildings that day was often tortuous. The emergency exits filled with smoke within minutes -- the cores of both towers acted like chimneys, just as in the 1975 fire -- so when the lights went out, thousands of office workers had to feel their way down the stairwells, choking in the total darkness. Tozzoli, who was in one of those pitch-black stairwells, guided groups of terrified tenants down to safety, counting out loud from 1 to 10 for the number of steps between each landing.

When the smoke cleared, authorities were able to ascertain what had happened. Now that the twin towers had achieved a financial stature that matched their height, now that they had become a symbol of global capitalism and American power, they had become a terrorist target. An estimated 1,000 pounds of explosives, packed into a yellow Ryder van parked two levels below ground, had blasted open a crater half the size of a football field. Six people were killed in the blast.

Lombardi, along with many others from the Port Authority who had been caught in the attack, approached the mission to repair and upgrade the towers with particular zeal. They reinforced damaged structures, applied glow-in-the-dark paint to the exit stairwells, added backup power to the

emergency lights and devised an air-pressure system to keep smoke out of the buildings' cores. Then in 1995, when Lombardi discovered that the fireproofing on the floor trusses was only half as thick as it should have been, he set about trying to fix the problem, though somewhat randomly: he ordered crews to apply new fireproofing each time renovations resulted in the opening up of the ceilings.

As the 1990's came to a close, rents were going way up yet again, and all but about 4 percent of the trade center was occupied. The center was generating about \$30 million a year in profits.

It was a fundamentally different population than what Rockefeller, Tobin and Tozzoli had advertised: the tenants turned out to be bankers, lawyers and insurance firms, by and large, not importers and exporters of goods. Still, it had become a place that reconnected Lower Manhattan to the global economy; a place that expressed the global reach of New York and the United States. The towers seemed invulnerable.

Or at least that was the line offered in public. In private, Lombardi remained worried about terrorism. "After '93, I knew that somehow, some way, they were going to come back," he says. He read a Tom Clancy book called "Debt of Honor," in which a plane is crashed into the Capitol in Washington, and he couldn't get the image out of his mind. At a regional disaster drill, he jokingly asked the Port Authority's security expert if he had consulted with Clancy. And at night, Lombardi had terrifying dreams, including one in which a terrorist fired a shoulder-mounted missile at the towers.

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