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NEIGHBORHOOD REPORT: WEST VILLAGE; Salutes in Ceramic, and a Spurned Appeal

By ALEX MINDLIN
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HUNDREDS of hand-painted tiles clank and shimmer on the rusty chain-link fence at Greenwich Avenue and Seventh Avenue South. The fence, across from St. Vincent's Hospital Manhattan, began as a spontaneous memorial to victims of the Sept. 11 attacks and is now a familiar part of the streetscape.

The tiles were created around the city, the country and the world; most were attached to the fence by Lorrie Veasey, the memorial's 43-year-old founder and the former owner of a nearby paint-your-own-pottery studio.

Among the images are a rainbow-striped bird spreading its wings over the towers; a heart with an empty, cut-out square in the center; and a white tile that reads, "I can't remember if I kissed you goodbye the last time I saw you."

But time, weather and friction have taken their toll. The oldest surviving tiles are crazed with hairline cracks, and others have fallen and shattered, or been rubbed raw by the sliding gate of the fence, which surrounds a tiny parking lot owned by New York City Transit.

Because the tiles are slowly being destroyed, some local officials, along with the community board, have asked the transit agency to turn the lot into a small park that could include a small memorial incorporating the tiles.

"It's a very important historic and emotional touchstone for the Village, and really all of Lower Manhattan," said Thomas Duane, the local state senator. "Why not let it be used as public space?"

In a letter in July to Lawrence Reuter, president of New York City Transit, Senator Duane and Assemblywoman Deborah Glick said that the parent agency, the Metropolitan Transit Authority, owed the neighborhood a good-will gesture. They cited the long-delayed construction of a subway ventilation plant on West 13th Street, which has disrupted traffic and blocked off sidewalks for four years.

But according to Charles Seaton, a spokesman for New York City Transit, the lot will not be turned into a park. The M.T.A., he said, hopes to build another ventilation plant on the site. "When we acquire property," he said, "it is for a stated use, which is for the benefit of New York City Transit and its customers."


Ms. Veasey insists that she is not sad to see the old tiles disappear. She points out that new tiles arrive regularly from ceramics studios around the country and from her successor, the pottery studio down the street, which, like her shop, allows customers to paint tiles for the fence at reduced prices.

"I like its transient nature," Ms. Veasey said of the memorial the other day as she picked up a few stray bits of trash from the surrounding curb.

Nor does she mind the tiles' gritty setting. "It's kind of unexpected, because it's ugly, and it's a fence," she said. "It takes people by surprise. And I like that, because that's what memory does for people who've lost someone. It takes them by surprise." ALEX MINDLIN

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