

# Is There Hope for Historical Society?

By PAUL GOLDBERGER

The New-York Historical Society, which was on the verge of signing away control of its library and much of its collection to New York University last month, now seems intent on trying to survive on its own. The

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proposed agreement with N.Y.U. foundered on opposition from community and cultural leaders and from elected officials, who saw the deal

as a direct violation of a promise made last year by officials of the historical society to keep the institution independent in exchange for an infusion of public funds.

But where does that leave the 190-year-old society, which has teetered on the brink of disaster for years? Still in limbo. In fact, it may be more in limbo than ever. Last week Herbert S. Winokur Jr., a co-chairman of the society, the acting chief executive officer and a prime mover behind the New York University deal, abruptly resigned; the institution is now being run by staff committees under the eye of Wilbur L. Ross Jr., who remains as chairman. The board is continuing to search for a chief executive; the public galleries remain closed, as they have been for more than a year, and there is no long-term strategic plan for the institution's survival.

The society has had money problems; it has had real-estate prob-

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## Deals and aborted deals, no public, no plans, but a will to survive.

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lems; it has had staff problems, and it has had attendance problems. (Or it did before it gave up and closed its galleries, which is surely one of the more innovative ways to solve attendance problems.) By now the historical society is probably more famous for its troubles than for its holdings, which happen to include one of the greatest collections of prints, photographs, architectural drawings, books and memorabilia anywhere in the country.

### A Savior at Hand

Given the society's long history of administrative, curatorial and financial catastrophe — not to mention failed merger discussions with the New York Public Library and the Museum of the City of New York — it's not hard to see how some members of the board thought of New York University as a white knight.

But the very way in which the arrangement was presented, as a "deal" complete with non-negotiable financial terms and a brief offering period before it expired, made it look more like a corporate takeover than an act of cultural support. And this is precisely why it was doomed to fail. For all its problems, the New-York Historical Society isn't a weakened company looking for a merger partner, it is a publicly chartered cultural institution whose independence was reaffirmed just a year ago by its trustees.

Can troubled cultural institutions be saved by the tactics of corporate deal makers? The proposed deal with New York University was a case in which the historical society, an old institution, cash-poor but with a noble name and rich in what deal makers would surely call underperforming assets, was lured, however willingly, into the embrace of a younger, more aggressive institution. Had the deal gone through, the university would have taken over the lion's share of the society's collections and control over much of its landmark building on Central Park West. While the historical society would have remained technically independent, it would have been largely a shell, with most of its assets and power switched to the university.

What is remarkable is not that this

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# Is There a Future for the Historical Society?

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deal fell apart, but that it came so close to going through, given how completely it rejected the spirit if not the letter of the promise the board made after last year's financial crisis to keep the society independent. At that time the board agreed to pare back its operations, sell \$20 million worth of objects from its collections of art and artifacts, sell off five building lots on West 76th Street adjacent to its building on Central Park West and come up with a plan for restructuring its staff and programs.

So far, virtually none of these things has happened. The board of the historical society, like so many cultural boards today, is heavily weighted with figures from the financial

world who seem more comfortable thinking about financial restructurings than about cultural policy. To these people, pragmatists more than cultural visionaries, the New York University deal may have seemed an easy way out of a management problem, not a problem coming from a long dearth of imagination and creativity.

Issues of who manages the society and who controls its valuable holdings only indirectly affect the public, of course; for most people the real question is whether the historical society will be able ever again to occupy a significant position in the cultural life of the city. Is it destined to be a dustbin, New York's attic, full of old portraits and pieces of silver? Or is there a way in which it can become a vibrant museum connected to the broader life of the city?

The record over the last few years is anything but encouraging. Minor attempts were made to upgrade the quality of exhibitions before the financial crisis overwhelmed all else last year, but in general, the society has ranked near the bottom of New York's museums so far as creativity, imagination and innovation are concerned. Those interested in seeing history as a part of the living city, and in being energized by the story of New York, have learned to look elsewhere.

## **Near the Bottom**

The importance of the historical society was always in its odd blend of comprehensive sweep and occasional depth, in the way in which its diverse holdings made a case for New York as a place of commerce, of art, of architecture, of politics and sociology. It hasn't been functioning anywhere near its potential for at least a generation, but its unusual collections and archives still offer an extraordinary opportunity for a creative museum director who has the energy and the imagination to build a fresh and exciting institution. At a time when the worlds of education, culture and technology are intersecting in myriad ways, this institution could be a leader in forging new connections between the different communities of New York. And it could enhance a sense of engagement with the city's story on the part of everyone.

Since the promises made last year in exchange for public assistance haven't yet been kept, it's far too early to conclude that the historical society can't make it as an independent institution. But if the society's internal turmoil continues much longer, will it be able to recruit the kinds of able people likely to bring fresh ideas to this tired place?