

West-Park Presbyterian Weighs Revamping

DAVID W DUNLAP

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By DAVID W. DUNLAP

Wrestling with the upkeep of an extravagant sanctuary built in a far more opulent era, the West-Park Presbyterian Church at Amsterdam Avenue and 86th Street is weighing whether to restore its 113-year-old home or demolish it.

"Our primary commitment is to have a Presbyterian presence at that corner," David Trainer, an elder (or board member) of the church, said yesterday. As for the building itself, he said there were three choices: "keep it the way it is, change part of it or change all of it."

Under the most extreme plan, the 19th-century church, which Mr. Trainer said needed some \$6 million of maintenance and repair work, would be replaced by an apartment building that would include a new sanctuary for the congregation, which numbers 90 to 100.

But Mr. Trainer said no decision had been made. "We have not in any way bound the church to anything," he said, adding that West-Park would welcome partners or donors.

Councilwoman Gale A. Brewer said: "None of us want to have a beautiful religious institution of that quality torn down. If they reached out to the community, they would find support."

At the same time, she criticized the church for not being more forthcoming about its plans.

Widely circulating word that West-Park had

struck a deal with the Related Companies, developers of the AOL Time Warner Center on Columbus Circle, was dismissed by Mr. Trainer as "speculation on speculation." A spokesman for Related would not comment.

Even the prospect of losing the ruddy, robust Romanesque church and its sentrylike tower has alarmed preservationists and neighbors, including the residents of 176 West 87th Street, which overlooks West-Park and would lose views, air and light should the site be redeveloped. Among them are lawyers, professors, a museum curator and a columnist for *The New York Times*, whose presence Mr. Trainer asked to have noted in the article as a condition for an interview.

The Landmark West preservation group said it would try to persuade the city's Landmarks Preservation Commission to reconsider the building, which was among those excluded in 1990 from the Upper West Side/Central Park West Historic District. "It's a landmark by any standard," said Kate Wood, its executive director. The complex includes the 1890 corner church, designed by Henry F. Kilburn, and an older mid-block chapel, designed by Leopold Eidlitz.

"If landmarks are an ally, then great," Mr. Trainer said. "If it limits our ability to do what the congregation wants to do on that corner, then we'd rather not have that limitation."



Ruby Washington/The New York Times

Needing \$6 million of maintenance and repair work, the West-Park Presbyterian Church is weighing restoration versus demolition.

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