

December 30, 2006

Neighbors Question the Historical Society's Plans to Expand

By GLENN COLLINS

Peter M. Wright was pacing from eighth-floor window to window, pointing to the spot where a proposed 23-story luxury tower of the New-York Historical Society could block a swath of his Central Park West sky. Then he indicated the place where a new annex building would eclipse his view of a row of charming limestone town houses.

"I'm concerned — and everyone in this building is concerned — about restricted views," said Mr. Wright, 64, a tenant of 6 West 77th Street, the residence most likely to be affected.

"But this can't be all about 'not in my backyard,'" Mr. Wright said. "It has to be about a project that is a monument to miscalculation."

That project is the planned \$20 million renovation of the society, to be followed not only by the construction of a fifth floor atop its roof but also a more costly glass apartment tower behind the society's museum and library at 170 Central Park West, between 76th and 77th Streets.

This month, the society received bids for the plan from eight developers. The society has approached the Landmarks Preservation Commission, which must approve changes to the building's neo-Classical exterior.

The society sees the proposal not as a miscalculation but rather as a necessity. "We hope the community sees our institution as a major amenity and asset, but we do have a need to grow," said Louise Mirrer, the society's president. The expansion, she said, would provide space for reorganized galleries and collections and help the institution meet a growing public role and contribute to its solvency. "We hope to do a responsible development."

But since it was announced last month, the proposal has been met with a wide coalition of opponents, as well as concern from city officials not only about the plan's aesthetics but also about the millions of dollars of taxpayers' money in previous improvements that could be demolished.

For decades, community opposition has hindered expansion plans. Now, neighbors and preservationists, bloodied from recent battles against developers, are rallying again. “The winds of war are stirring, and this is the calm before the storm,” said Joseph Bolanos, president of the West 76th Street Park Block Association, who claims to have 100 members living between Central Park West and Columbus Avenue.

In the first institutional opposition, the 13-member public policy committee of the New York Landmarks Conservancy earlier this month rejected the society’s initial plan to renovate the 1908 building, said Peg Breen, the independent group’s president.

Referring to renderings that depicted a larger entrance on Central Park West and some larger windows, Ms. Breen said that enlarging the entrance and the windows “would amount to a wholesale removal of much original building material,” adding, “They are a history museum, and the building is part of their history.”

While the conservancy cannot veto construction, its recommendations have sometimes carried weight with the Landmarks Commission and government and private groups that provide financing.

Dr. Mirrer said she was concerned that the current entrance did not conform to fire-exit requirements and that it was “important to modify the building in ways that signify we are open and welcoming.” The society’s architects are changing the design to respond to the conservancy’s feedback.

Some preservationists like Ms. Breen see the tower as a symbol of other struggling West Side nonprofit organizations. “Developers are going door to door to churches to see if they can buy them,” she said.

Mr. Bolanos of the block association said the tower “would ruin the neighborhood,” and added: “Our membership is concerned about the changing character of the West Side. People feel they are being steamrolled.”

He referred to struggles like those over the nearby Dakota Stable on Amsterdam Avenue at 77th Street, the Museum of Arts and Design at 2 Columbus Circle and the Congregation Shearith Israel at 70th Street near Central Park West.

Kate Wood, the executive director of Landmark West, a 21-year-old Upper West Side group, said: “We’ve been getting a lot of e-mails and calls saying what can we do? People are on high alert.”

At 6-16 West 77th Street, “people are concerned, but not hysterical,” said Ernie von Simson, the president of the co-op’s seven-member board. “There is so much we don’t know. We met with Dr. Mirrer, and we want to meet again.”

Councilwoman Gale A. Brewer, who represents the neighborhood, already opposes one aspect of the society’s plan. “For historic reasons, a glass tower is wrong,” she said, adding: “This is going to be a long process. I don’t know if they can get it done.”

Dr. Mirrer said, “The glass tower idea was a place holder,” adding, “It’s not determined what the tower will look like because the developers will choose the architect with us.”

Nevertheless, Mr. Bolanos said, “our game plan is to protest everything that happens.” He added: “We’re ready to go full blast. Our people are very angry.”

The society’s plans may face restrictions imposed by the city and the state, which have contributed more than \$25 million for improvements inside the building since the early 1990s, when the neglected, and nearly bankrupt, society closed its doors for two years.

In its initial presentations, the society said it was considering moving its auditorium to the five-story annex and using the space for an orientation center. It planned to reconfigure gallery floors and ceilings, to replace the current elevator with two new ones and adorn a gallery ceiling with art by Keith Haring.

“A substantial amount of money was spent in the auditorium and in a renovation of the elevator and in the first-floor galleries for new ceilings and other improvements,” said Ed Norris, the society’s chief operating officer from 1994 to 2002. “And new floors were put in.”

The acceptance of city money required the society to sign agreements to protect the construction for the life of the bonds that paid for the improvements, said Kate D. Levin, the city’s cultural affairs commissioner. “If it is not a necessary change, and it vitiates a taxpayer investment, we’re not going to do it,” the commissioner said, adding that the society had submitted only preliminary plans. “We are sure they will be cooperative in protecting city assets.”

Dr. Mirrer said, “We will be absolutely scrupulous in following the agreements,” adding, “We would not do anything illegal.”

Experts disagree about possible financial return from a tower. Daniel F. Sciannameo, the president of Albert Valuation Group New York, an appraiser and real estate consultant,

estimated that the society could get “\$10 million to \$20 million,” including the construction of its annex for free.

Development rights could go as high as \$600 or \$700 a square foot, he said, because “how many times do you get a chance to build on Central Park West?”

But Robert I. Shapiro, the president of City Center Real Estate, a consulting company specializing in development rights, said, “A lot of developers would approach it with a great deal of caution,” adding that the society “would be lucky if it were a wash,” where the developer did not profit enough to give a bonus to the society.

The possibility of high construction cost was a negative, he said, as well as delays resulting from the landmark and community-consultation process.

Dr. Mirrer said, “We have no dollar threshold or expectation, but any money that we raise in any way would be very welcome.”

The neighborhood is not uniformly opposed. “At present, the street is less safe than it might be,” said David Berkowitz, the owner of a West 76th Street town house next to the society’s empty lot at 7-13 West 76th Street, “and that’s one reason why I might be supportive of a luxury residential building developed on that site.”

But other residents, like Mr. Bolanos, are raising objections to construction. He points to evidence of a 20-foot-deep stream that he says would threaten the basement of the annex, with its three floors of underground library storage. Dr. Mirrer responded that test borings had been taken “and construction seems to be feasible.”

Still others are challenging the society’s viability. Mr. Wright, the co-op tenant, who is co-chairman of the Park West 77th Street Block Association, said the society “is extremely fragile financially, and there is no way they are going to realize from the tower scheme the money they will need to ensure their future. Why go through all the agita if the institution is going down?”

He mentioned the society’s budget of \$17 million against \$4 million in revenues from admissions and other sources; Dr. Mirrer had to raise \$13 million this year. Even a developer windfall “would not solve the society’s financial problems for long,” Mr. Wright said.

Dr. Mirrer countered that the society had balanced its budget for the last 10 years. “Our future is very rosy, and our very strong board has the financial wherewithal and an intellectual commitment to history,” she said.