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New Historical Society Project Would Stir Up Skyline, and Residents

By [GLENN COLLINS](#)

The [New-York Historical Society](#) wants to begin a \$20 million renovation of its landmark building at 170 Central Park West that would also allow a developer to build a 23-story glass apartment tower behind the society's museum and library, altering the skyline.

The society has approached the Landmarks Preservation Commission, which must approve changes to the exterior of the society's austere neoclassical palazzo between 76th and 77th Streets, across from the [American Museum of Natural History](#).

The society is seeking a developer who would provide financing and construct not only the apartment tower and an extra floor atop its four-story building, but also a five-story annex that would rise above an adjacent empty lot it owns at 7-13 West 76th Street.

Louise Mirrer, the society's president, said the proposal would symbolize the institution's new public face, provide needed space and buttress its long-term solvency. The society has received \$10 million toward the renovation from the Empire State Development Corporation, the New York City Council and the New York City Department of Cultural Affairs and plans to raise the rest, she said.

But neighborhood opposition has foiled the society's planned expansions in the past, including a 1984 proposal for a much broader 23-story apartment tower of limestone and granite, designed by the architect Hugh Hardy. The landmarks commission voted it down.

Other projects near Central Park have been encountering stiff resistance. Directly across the park, some East Side residents are fighting the construction of a 30-story glass apartment tower designed by the architect Norman Foster atop 980 Madison Avenue at 76th Street. And the [Whitney Museum of American Art](#) on East 75th Street has apparently decided to move a long-planned addition downtown after an acrimonious community battle.

The society's plan is likely to get close scrutiny from residents and preservationists.

"I think there will be great concern in our building," said Peter M. Wright, a marketing consultant who is on the board of the cooperative adjacent to the society at 6-16 West 77th Street.

The journalist [Bill Moyers](#), who has lived a block away on Central Park West for 25 years, said: "We would support the renovation of the existing building, but everyone should object to a tower that would be a stark intrusion. Would you put a 23-story tower next to the [Louvre](#)?"

This time around, the lead renovation architect is Paul Spencer Byard of Platt Byard Dovell White in Manhattan, and the proposal to potential developers specifies that a "star architect" be chosen to design the tower, subject to the society's approval. The first phase could start next summer.

The master plan calls for 70,000 feet of new program and office space for the society, as well as 120,000 square feet for residential use. Ultimately the renovation would create three large new galleries in the building while providing more continuous access to existing exhibition space.

Mr. Byard said the building "was designed as a private club that did not intend to embrace the public."

"The front entrance is so tiny," he said. "It's as if they expected no one to come in there."

Dr. Mirrer said the building had been likened "to a mausoleum, a very forbidding building that is hardly welcoming." She said the confusing layout permitted only a fraction of the society's collections to be on view.

"We want the building to symbolize our new direction, signaling to people that we want them to come in," she said.

The society with its 100 employees had a budget of \$17 million last year, and some 175,000 visitors came to see the \$5 million show, "Slavery in New York." The next installment, "New York Divided: Slavery and the Civil War," opens Nov. 17.

In the renovation, the prominent portal on West 77th Street would be modified and de-emphasized, and the Central Park West entrance would be tripled to 38 feet in width. A crystalline lobby would open onto an orientation and exhibition space, leading to a cafe moved from the basement to the gallery now at the corner of 77th Street and Central Park West.

The master plan would nearly double the society's gallery space; add an elevator and augment educational, administrative and storage space. A 400-seat auditorium, replacing a 320-seat

theater, would be constructed in the 76th Street annex, which would also have classroom space and three floors of library stacks below grade.

The annex would be a floor taller than existing brownstones on West 76th Street, but Mr. Byard said it would conform to zoning restrictions. A newly constructed fifth floor in the main building would provide exhibition and event space.

In a second phase of construction, which could take five years or more, the society's 1937 library-stack tower would be replaced by a 23-story skyscraper that has 18 floors of condominium apartments.

The apartment tower would be 280 feet high, doubling the 136-foot height of the current structure. On floors above the annex, the tower would extend over the society's current roof. No air rights are necessary, Mr. Bayard said, since the tower conforms to the building's potential size under current zoning rules.

Dr. Mirrer said she hoped that some of the apartments could be set aside as affordable housing for teachers.

The core of the society's building was finished 98 years ago, with modifications in the 1930s. The exterior has landmark status not only individually, but also as part of the Upper West Side-Central Park West Historic District and a smaller domain, the Central Park West-76th Street Historic District. The Department of City Planning must also sign off, and public hearings are expected.

The arguments could get ugly.

"The society's plan would prop up an institution that is no longer viable," said Mr. Wright, of the co-op next door. "Why should we go through all this agita if the institution is going down?"

Mr. Wright added that while views in the 92-unit building are likely to be blocked — including his own on the eighth floor — it was premature to say whether his building's board would file a lawsuit. He is also co-chairman of the Park West 77th Street Block Association.

Kate Wood, executive director of Landmark West, a 21-year-old Upper West Side group, said that some preservationists were also concerned that the proposal would have an impact on "the skyline of Central Park West, and would be seen as a precedent, since all over the city, low-rise historic sites are seen as development opportunities."

Mr. Moyers's wife, Judith Davidson Moyers, is also a preservation activist. She is worried about

the tower's shadow on Central Park and added that "it seems inconsistent with the mission of the historical society to intrude on the historical nature of the neighborhood."

Dr. Mirrer said that "having a good relationship with the community is important for us. We hope that the amenity of having a lively cultural institution would be great for the neighborhood."

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