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L&L Holding Co. has asked 11 top architects to submit designs for a new tower at 425 Park Ave.

Planning New York's Next Iconic Building

By ELIOT BROWN

Nearly a half century after much of Park Avenue's high-end corridor of office buildings were built, developer L&L Holding Co. is advancing plans for a new tower.

Aiming to create an iconic, eye-catching building in the place of a 1950s-built boxy tower at 425 Park Ave., L&L last week reached out to 11 top architectural firms to join a competition to design a new tower. The list included Norman Foster, Richard Rogers and Jean Nouvel, each of whom have won architecture's top Pritzker Prize.

"We want to work with the best architectural minds out there, because we have some very important things to achieve and to deal with," says David Levinson, L&L's chief executive. Mr. Levinson says he hopes to begin demolition work in 2015 and to finish the new building two years later. The price tag on the project is expected to be about \$750 million, he says.

The bold plan to knock down the bulk of the existing building and to put a new one in its place reflects Mr. Levinson's faith in the value of the site. Currently the building is mostly leased with tenants including the white-shoe law firm Kaye Scholer.

But Mr. Levinson is planning to vacate the building on the bet that he'll be able to substantially boost rents once he replaces it with a modern, attractive de-

sign. While older, unremarkable buildings similar to the current 425 Park Ave. tend to fetch annual rents in the \$50-to-\$70 per square foot range, top architectural icons the Seagram Building at 375 Park Ave. easily win tenants paying over \$100 a foot.

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The plan still faces high hurdles. For starters, Mr. Levinson needs to attract financing for the project at a time that the Manhattan office market shows some signs of weakness due to the downturn and the contraction of the financial services industry.

Mr. Levinson believes great architecture will enable him to attract tenants and financing. He hopes the building's design will be achieve the same distinction as the Seagram Building or the Lever House at 390 Park Ave., both of which are considered modernist icons.

Vishaan Chakrabarti, a former city planning official and director of Columbia University's Center for Urban Real Estate, is directing the competition for L&L. "We think it could be a jewel, and given where it sits, a crown jewel," Mr. Chakrabarti says.

Park Avenue has been largely static for at least four decades. The bulk of the office towers were erected in the 1950s and 1960s on platforms over rail tracks leading into Grand Central Terminal.

Most of the towers were built with a boxy design that creates a relatively uniform feel for the wide boulevard. The most recent large office building to be constructed was 499 Park, at 59th St., built in 1980, although it doesn't take up the full block.

Complicating the redevelopment for 425 Park and other buildings on Park Avenue is a quirk of the city's zoning code that would force Mr. Levinson to build a smaller tower if he demolished the existing building in its entirety. To avoid this, Mr. Levinson plans to leave in place the steel skeleton for the bottom 25% of the building, the minimum required.

The Bloomberg administration has told landlords it is considering boosting the development rights for office building owners in parts of eastern Midtown. But that plan would likely take at least another year and a half before it would be finalized, and Mr. Levinson has said he needs to begin planning now under the current rules.

L&L partnered with Lehman Brothers in 2006 to buy the long term lease on 425 Park. Lehman still has a stake in the building, although it is looking to exit all its real estate investments over the next few years.

Bob Berrett for The Wall Street Journal