

Park Avenue Site Has Architects Competing to Make It Shine

BY DAVID W. DUNLAP | JULY 10, 2012 | THE NEW YORK TIMES

The developer David W. Levinson could have set for himself the simple task of commissioning a better-designed tower for 425 Park Avenue than the one that's been there since 1957.

But that would have been a very low bar.

Most anything would be an aesthetic improvement over the current 425 Park - a bulky, 31-story wedding cake of a structure designed more by zoning rules than by architects (though Kahn & Jacobs received the nominal credit). Its facade seems to suggest that the developers wanted to create a steel-clad look on a white-brick pocketbook.

In 2015, when his L&L Holding Company is expected to gain control of the site, Mr. Levinson intends to construct an office building for tenants willing to pay a premium for a high-profile design at a conspicuous location, between East 55th and 56th Streets.

He has engaged four of the world's leading architects to compete for the job: Norman Foster of Foster & Partners, Zaha Hadid of Zaha Hadid Architects, Rem Koolhaas of OMA, and Richard Rogers of Rogers Stirk Harbour & Partners.

"We wanted the broadest view," Mr. Levinson said. "It was important to select four architects that were very different." Three of the firms confirmed their participation in the 425 Park Avenue exercise. Ms. Hadid's office said that as a matter of policy, it did not comment on projects it had not been awarded.

The four firms began to make their presentations privately on Tuesday and will complete them on Wednesday.

"We'll see their designs, sort through that over the summer and make some decisions," Mr. Levinson said in an interview last month. By "we," he includes an advisory committee headed by Vishaan Chakrabarti, the director of the Center for Urban Real Estate at Columbia University. Mr. Levinson intends to unveil the competing visions publicly, he said, though there will be no popular referendum.

"It is a decision that is solely within our discretion," Mr. Levinson said, "but we do intend to share it."

Mr. Levinson said he expected to make a selection by fall. Demolition and construction will not begin until 2015. L&L Holding Company now holds a "sandwich" position between the original developer of 425 Park Avenue and the owner of the land on which it stands, the Teachers Insurance and Annuity Association-College Retirement Equities Fund. Three years from now, the original land lease will expire and L&L Holding will become the leaseholder on the site until well into the 2080s.

The office leases will also expire in 2015, bringing to an end what must be one of the longer running commercial tenancies in the city. The law firm of Kaye Scholer has been at 425 Park for 55 years. At one time or another, the building also served as headquarters for or principal office of Nabisco, I.B.M., the American Federation of Musicians, the industrial design firm Raymond Loewy Associates and the architectural firm Skidmore, Owings & Merrill.

Not all of the structure will be torn down. It happens that 425 Park Avenue, with 620,000 gross square feet of space, has 18 times as much floor area as its lot size. Zoning rules issued since it was built would limit a new structure on the site to a floor-area ratio of 15-to-1, meaning that if Mr. Levinson were to start from scratch, he could not construct a building as large. But it turns out, he said, zoning rules will permit him to retain the 18-to-1 ratio if he preserves at least 25 percent of the existing structure. The other 75 percent can be entirely new.

A spokeswoman for the City Planning Department confirmed his characterization of the rules.

There is a further chance that the Planning Commission will raise the floor-area ratio for some prospective development sites in east Midtown to 18, as a matter of right. A presentation of planners' strategy is to be made Wednesday to Community Board 5.

Mr. Levinson said he had asked each of the competing architects to prepare designs for towers that could be built under the current regimen and with a higher density.

He also warned them, in a prospectus, not to let their "starchitect" status interfere with sensible financial judgment. "While the client team is open-minded about material and aesthetic expression," the prospectus said, "a restrained elegance has often proven to be more successful for this building type than irrational exuberance."