

Foster + Partners Wins 425 Park Sweepstakes, Creating New Midtown Landmark for L&L

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Who needs the Midtown East Rezoning to transform the area when you have intrepid developers and unlikely circumstances? O.K., so both of those are super-rare, so bring on the rezoning,

In the meantime, though, we can occupy ourselves with David Levinson's daring plan to tear down 75 percent of 425 Park Avenue and replace it with a dynamic new tower by Lord Norman Foster. Foster + Partners have emerged victorious from a competition Mr. Levinson's L&L Holdings held over the past few months between some of the world's most high-profile designers. The British Pritzker Prize winner beat out fellow starchitects Rem Koolhaas, Zaha Hadid and Richard Rogers (no Americans, unfortunately). "We are grateful to each of the firms for the thoughtfulness and creativity they demonstrated throughout the process," Mr. Levinson said in a release. "There is no doubt that each group was fully capable of helping us realize our vision of a 425 Park Avenue tower that redefines the modern office environment while also respecting and enhancing the timeless allure of the Plaza district."

The project poses an unusual challenge. Because the existing 32-story building was built in 1957, it is larger than current zoning (created in 1961) allows. Were Mr. Levinson to demolish the entire building, he would be forced to replace it with a smaller structure. But his clever real estate attorneys have determined that they could retain the base of the building, building a replacement up from there, and, through some zoning wizardry, maintain the new building at the current one size, 650,000 square feet.

The new building as currently conceived will reach 687 feet, considerably taller than the 370-foot structure it will be replacing. The design by Foster + Partners is interesting in part because it looks somewhat like a midcentury office tower in the Seagrams/425 Park vein, except that it has been judo-chopped in two spots and is now held up by giant trusses. This not only breaks up the scale of what would likely be a massive building but also creates two terraces, an increasingly popular amenity in office towers. On the street, a rendering shows a vast plaza, providing much-needed open space (even if there is a building overhanging it) in the heart of Midtown.

Should the Midtown East Rezoning be approved, it would allow Mr. Levinson to potentially build a tower 50 percent bigger than what he already can do, but he would have to wait until 2018 to do so, because of a special provision in the rezoning to protect the development of projects at Hudson Yards and the World Trade Center, where millions more square feet of office space is already poised to come online.

Lord Foster is best known for his pioneering work on what became known in the 1970s and '80s, when he began to build serious projects such as the HSBC headquarters in Hong Kong and London's Stansted airport, as high-tech or high modern architecture. In New York, he has built the new Hearst Building and the Sperrone Westwater Gallery on the Bowery as well as designing 2 World Trade Center, the second tallest building on the site that is indefinitely stalled at the moment.

For those eager to get a look at all of Foster + Partner's designs for 425 Park, as well as the three losing proposals, they will be on display Oct. 18 and 19 as part of the Municipal Art Society's annual MAS Summit, to be held at Jazz at Lincoln Center.

Correction: An earlier version of this post stated the new building would be not much taller than the existing one. In fact, the new building is almost twice as tall. It also credit Lord Foster with designing the Pompidou Centre with Richard Rogers. It was he and Renzo Piano that built the Paris museum. The Observer regrets the errors.