

MoMA tower to loom over Manhattan

Concerns over Jean Nouvel skyscraper, to house museum extension in its base

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The land next to the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) may become the site of one of the tallest buildings in Manhattan. The museum sold the narrow lot—which extends from West 53rd to West 54th Streets—to Houston-based developer Hines in 2007 for \$125m. The company has announced that it intends to build a 85-storey glass and steel tower, designed by French architect Jean Nouvel, that would rise 1,250 ft, the same height as the Empire State Building minus its antenna. The skyscraper would contain apartments and a hotel resting on a base into which MoMA plans to extend its permanent collection galleries. The City Planning Commission will vote on the scheme on 9 September, then the City Council will decide whether or not to allow the project to proceed.

MoMA has enthusiastically endorsed the plan, which would add 39,500 sq. ft of gallery space (an increase of 30%). Speaking at a Planning Commission hearing in July, MoMA director Glenn Lowry said that the new space would connect seamlessly to existing permanent collection galleries on the second, fourth and fifth floors of the museum, enabling more works to go on view. “Since the added space on the second floor is double-height space, which is why there’s no third floor, this affords us even greater opportunity to exhibit many of our major sizeable works of contemporary art, such as those by Richard Serra and Martin Puryear,” he said, noting that the contemporary galleries on the second floor would double in size.

For its recent expansion, completed in 2004, MoMA had architect Yoshio Taniguchi design the galleries and elevators on the west side of the museum to allow a future expansion. MoMA will own its galleries in the Hines building.

Crain's New York Business reported that Goldman Sachs is an equity partner in the project, which suggests the bank is providing capital. "As a private firm, we don't comment on deal structures," says a spokesman for Hines. But even if financing is secured, to erect a 650,000 sq. ft structure above a tiny 17,000 sq. ft base in Midtown will require zoning permits and transfer of air rights from nearby buildings. Hines has approval to acquire the rights from the University Club, Thomas Episcopal Church and the American Folk Art Museum, which adjoins both the tower site and MoMA. (MoMA previously acquired the University Club's air rights but has not yet sold them to Hines, says a museum spokeswoman.) "MoMA had no formal role in determining the design of the building," she says, adding that MoMA did not know how tall the building would be when it sold the property.

The prospect of a pencil-thin skyscraper rising from the midtown block has enraged local residents, who made a video denouncing the plan that is available on the internet. The local community board has rejected the plan, objecting to the shadows and congestion that the tower would create, but the board's role is only advisory in the city's land use review process. The Planning Commission may deny the plan or suggest modifications, sending Hines back to the drawing board. But at the July hearing, the main concern expressed by commission chairwoman Amanda Burden was that the Nouvel design not be compromised by changes.

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