

‘Looking Up’

If they must build it at Fourth Presbyterian, this could be the way to do it

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The shudders were almost audible when the Fourth Presbyterian Church of Chicago announced last year that it planned to build a condominium tower behind its historic North Michigan Avenue church. A giant skyscraper looming above the historic Gothic Revival church? Wouldn't the high-rise blot out the sun from the church's serene courtyard? It was easy to expect the worst.

But now that the church has released the drawings for the 64-story tower — its members voted overwhelmingly to endorse the project last Sunday — those fears appear unwarranted. The design, by the Chicago firm of Lucien Lagrange and Associates, is surprisingly sensitive, easily several cuts above the tombstone-like, exposed concrete high-rises that are turning the River North district into an architectural graveyard.

If a tall building is going to rise at this prominent site, this is the way to do it. The design shifts the debate from whether this is the wrong place for a skyscraper to whether this proposal can survive the rigors of developers' spreadsheets and become an elegant backdrop that the church and the city desperately deserve. Yet that does not mean that city officials should get out their rubber stamp and merrily send this project on its way.

Major issues remain unresolved, from the materials that will clad the tower and do much to shape its skyline presence to the sure-to-be contentious issue of whether the church finally should be made a city landmark. The church fought off such a proposal in 1987, arguing that landmark status would be an impermissible incursion of government in the practice of religion. Four years later, the U.S. Supreme Court rejected that line of reasoning in a celebrated New York City case that deemed

landmark designation an eminently reasonable exercise of government authority.

Clearly, this is no ordinary project. In a classic example of creative fundraising, the church is selling off the air rights above its highly valuable Michigan Avenue property to fund a major expansion of its mission. At the same time, the deal is processing on one of the most prominent sites in Chicago, where there is no room for false architectural moves.

Link to the Past

Located at 866 N. Michigan, directly across the street from the muscular John Hancock Center, Fourth Presbyterian forms one of the last links to the elegant old Boul Mich, fast receding into memory amid the onslaught of bland vertical malls and garish chain stores. On a street that is ever more canyonized, the church provides a prized amenity: Its courtyard, framed by delightful, domestically scaled church buildings, and the huge swath of sky above it. Big projects are about give and take, about striking a balance between civic and commercial interests, and so it is here. There is no getting around the reality that the skyscraper, which would replace a parking lot and some low-rise church buildings just west of Fourth Presbyterian, will take away some of that prized sky, making the church's courtyard feel more hemmed in.

Also, beyond dispute is the fact that the church is acting as a commercial developer in this case, even if it proposes to use the \$25 million it will get from the air-rights sale for such noble endeavors as a new community center near the Cabrini Green public housing development.

So the question is: What will the church and its co-developers, Edward R. James Partners and OPUS North Corp., give back to the city in architectural

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quality and guarantees that the new will enhance, rather than mar, the old?

The issue is all about making cities livable places rather than overbuilt jungles. And the troublesome thing is that the developers aren't ready to provide definitive answers about the quality of the materials that will clad this tower and do much to affect the way it looks at both street-level and the skyline.

Still, the design is heading in the right direction. This turns out to be a very different endeavor from the wildly inappropriate plan for a reflective glass, 59-story office tower that officials of St. Bartholomew's Episcopal Church in Manhattan unveiled in 1981. The tower would have risen alongside—and partly above—the landmark Byzantine church, destroying its architectural integrity and wiping out a cherished piece of open space.

Supreme Court Decision

A furious battle over the plan culminated in 1991, when the U.S. Supreme Court let stand a lower-court ruling that accepted the practice of conferring landmark status on churches by virtue of the same authority that allows government to enforce public-welfare laws, such as fire safety, in religious buildings.

Fourth Presbyterian is not a landmark, of course, but even if it were, the present plan would be hard to fault.

Much of the credit for that goes to Lagrange, an alumnus of Skidmore, Owing & Merrill who set up his own shop in 1985. He has since designed a series of high-profile high-rises in a wide range of styles, from the disappointing, mansard roof-topped Park Tower at 800 N. Michigan to the

more bracingly modern Erie on the Park at 510 W. Erie St.

Thankfully, it is the more sophisticated Lagrange, not the stage-set historicist, who has showed up for this project. With church facilities, including a chapel, on the first six floors and 240 luxury condominiums above, it seems sure to tempt some publicist to label it “a place where you can live, work and pray.” The tower is to open in 2009.

Respectful Contrast

Lagrange has not made a facile stab at contextualism, tarding up a massive high-rise with Gothic details. Instead, he wisely seeks to engage the church and its surroundings through respectful contrast rather than by mimicry.

His thin, abstract tower would rise directly behind the church itself, a Gothic Revival gem designed by Boston architect Ralph Adams Cram in association with parishioner Howard Van Doren Shaw and finished in 1914.

The tower's three distinct vertical sections along Michigan Avenue (one to be clad in glass, the next in precast concrete, and the last predominantly in glass) would subtly echo the church's upward drive. The curving, all-glass wall would simultaneously reflect the church's spire and dematerialize the tower, making it a backdrop that would allow the church to remain the focus.

Lagrange's plan is equally deft as a work of urban design, stepping back at various levels to reduce the tower's bulk and to echo the heights of nearby high-rises.

By shifting the skyscraper toward the northern edge of the property, he ensures it will have the least possible impact on the courtyard and the

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sunlight that comes into it. While some sunlight would be lost, studies carried out for the architect show, the impact would not be terrible. During the June 21 equinox, for example, the tower would extinguish daylight in the courtyard for just one extra hour—between 5 p.m. and 6 p.m.

Street-level designs have been worked out with similar care, appropriately acknowledging the scale and proportions of the church rather than simply its Gothic vocabulary.

Even so, it is hard not to have some misgivings about this plan. Will the tower minimize and trivialize the church, making it look like a giant's footrest? Perhaps.

The preservationist in me wonders whether a building in the 30-story range might have built a better bridge between the church and the comfortably scaled buildings, like the Whitehall and the Tremont hotels, immediately to its west. The realist says that, given the high price of the land involved here, no developer would agree to that. The ultimate issue is handling the commercial imperative with style and sensitivity.

That's where the big caveat about materials comes in. As good as it is to have a commitment from the developers that this building's inner structure will be covered rather than exposed, the handsome drawings we are seeing could turn out to be false promises if the developers don't spring for top-drawer masonry and glass.

There's a huge difference between the flat-looking precast concrete panels at the Park Tower and the more robust, variegated façade Lagrange shows in his drawings. Even the architect acknowledges that his curving glass wall is a bit too green right now and that he can make it more elegant.

As they review the usual concerns—traffic, shadows, downdrafts that can knock pedestrians off their feet—city officials should press the developers to commit to using nothing but the finest materials. That includes limestone at the tower's base, which would match the high-quality exterior of the church and its other buildings.

City officials also should explore the option of finally conferring official landmark status on the church and its adjacent buildings, which are due to be renovated as part of the project. Why do that if the church and its pastor, Rev. John Buchanan, have been so responsible with their skyscraper plan?

Because church leaders change and there may come a day when another pastor decides to sell off a chunk of the intimate, indispensable courtyard to shore up finances or fund a further expansion of the church's mission.

Whatever social good it might accomplish, a plan like that would destroy the very public good that Lagrange's sensitive juxtaposition of old and new so carefully preserves.

The idea is to push this already-admirable design to the highest level – and to guard against any subsequent efforts that might spoil it. That's not a luxury, but a necessity: For this critical site, only superlative will do.