

NY REAL ESTATE RESIDENTIAL

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Church Thinks Mixed-Use

By JOSEPH DE AVILA

A three-alarm fire earlier last year damaged much of the interior of the historic New Baptist Temple in downtown Brooklyn, forcing church officials to think of creative ways to save the structure. Now the temple wants to team up with a real-estate developer to repurpose the 118-year-old building into a mixed-use facility with apartments and new church space.



Rob Bennett for The Wall Street Journal

Pastors Edwin Colon, left, and Gus Rodriguez in the New Baptist Temple in Brooklyn, damaged by fire in 2010.

Church officials envision a complete renovation of the 40,000-square-foot Romanesque Revival structure that would include an addition that could more than double the current size of the building. A significant portion would continue to be devoted to church facilities, with the remainder going toward rental apartments or condos and possibly retail space or additional community facilities.

"We want to bring something to downtown Brooklyn that will rival lower Manhattan," said Gus Rodriguez, the temple's executive pastor. "We want to focus on the residential aspects."

The church is still looking for a developer. The site will likely draw interest because of the central location of the facility, which is near the Brooklyn Academy of Music and the Atlantic Center transit hub, said Ofer Cohen, president of real-estate services firm TerraCRG Commercial Realty Group.

"I don't think you can go wrong in this area if you are doing high-end rentals or condos," said Mr. Cohen, who isn't involved with the marketing of the church. Downtown Brooklyn in particular has done well for high-end rentals, he added. "There is definitely going to be a huge amount of interest just because of the location."

High-end rental apartments in downtown Brooklyn currently earn an average of about \$48 a square foot, according to TerraCRG. And developers can charge premiums for renovated apartments in historic structures, Mr. Cohen said.

The challenge, however, is the costly process of saving the existing church structure. "The question is how much can be preserved?" Mr. Cohen said. "It will be cheaper to knock it down."

And that's a step that church officials hope to avoid.

"The facade is full of character and full of history," Mr. Rodriguez said. "We want to maintain the character and integrity of that exterior."

The church was built on Schermerhorn Street in 1893 and was originally called Baptist Temple. It traces its roots back to the first Baptist denomination in Brooklyn, according to documents filed with the National Register of Historic Places. In 1917, a fire destroyed most of the church structure and it was immediately rebuilt.

The current makeup of the church was the result of a merger between two congregations in 2005, Mr. Rodriguez said. As part of its community service, the church in recent years has focused on serving people with substance-abuse problems and offers counseling and a food pantry, among other services.

The building was already in need of repairs when an electrical fire destroyed most of the interior of the structure in July 2010. It also needs a new roof, which will likely cost several million dollars, Mr. Rodriguez said.

One advantage for the church is that it has no mortgage so there is no threat of foreclosure, Mr. Rodriguez said. And even though New Baptist Temple won't be able to rebuild alone, church officials say they have no intention of selling the building.

"We are staunch advocates of serving the needs of the community," Mr. Rodriguez said. "We are not selling. We are not going away."

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