

Big Buildings Planned on Grounds of St. John the Divine

By DAVID W. DUNLAP

The next crane you see on the grounds of St. John the Divine will not be there to complete the cathedral.

Instead, large new buildings are planned on each end of the 11.3-acre grounds in Morningside Heights, under a development framework agreed on last week by the Cathedral Church of St. John the Divine and the city's Landmarks Preservation Commission. The developer will probably be Columbia University.

The agreement coincided with the designation of the Episcopal cathedral as an official landmark. It establishes three-dimensional bulk controls, called envelopes, within which construction can occur without further approval by the commission, although the panel will have two representatives on an 11-member design review board.

Roughly two-thirds of each envelope could

be filled with a structure. One building, overlooking Morningside Park, might be 20 stories tall, rivaling the nearby 424 Cathedral Parkway tower.

The volumes suggest buildings that would have a total of nearly 700,000 square feet of floor area, though the amount could be much less, depending in part on whether the buildings are residential or institutional. Even 700,000 square feet falls far short of the theoretical zoning potential for the entire site.

But the prospect of new structures on the cathedral grounds, known as the Close, has sounded alarms.

"Let's try to imagine the French allowing a building that would block views of Notre Dame," said Joyce Hackett, a novelist and the president of Morningside Heights Neigh-

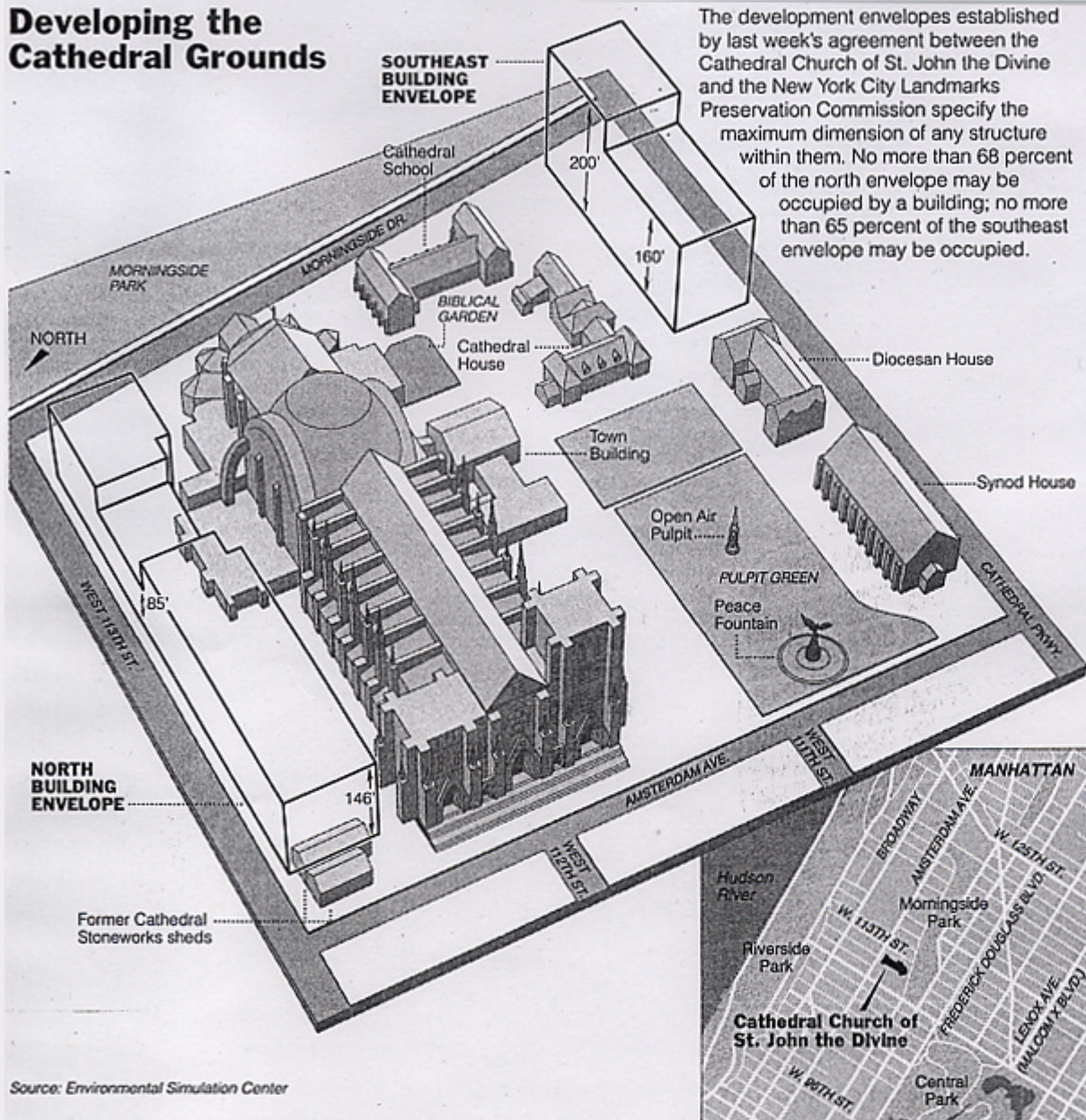


James Estrin/The New York Times

The Cathedral Church of St. John the Divine was recently made a landmark.

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Developing the Cathedral Grounds



Buildings Planned for Cathedral Grounds

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bors, a community group. According to the agreement, the cathedral will use substantially all of the proceeds from the development to "restore its operations to a sound financial footing," increase its endowment (now \$7 million) and "maintain, preserve and restore the cathedral building and other historic buildings." Deferred maintenance and site improvement projects require \$17 million to \$20 million, said Stephen Facey, the executive vice president of the cathedral.

Getting the cathedral back on its feet would set the stage for a capital campaign to finish the structure, which was begun 111 years ago. But Ms. Hackett asked, "To what length can nonprofits go to fulfill their mission?"

Besides generating revenue, which cathedral leaders would not estimate, development must be "congruent with the cathedral's mission and vision" and "compatible with the cathedral's historic architectural qualities," the trustees have said. They

The prospect of new structures worries neighbors.

also said they expected architecture that was "not necessarily conventional," offering as examples the work of Diller & Scofidio, Steven Holl, Rafael Moneo and Renzo Piano.

The envelopes do not dictate shapes but rather maximum dimensions. No more than 68 percent of the north envelope and 65 percent of the southeast envelope can be occupied by a building. The north site has a height limit of 146 feet, equivalent to the point where the cathedral roof line begins, said Michael Kwartler of the Environmental Simulation Center, planning and zoning consultants to the cathedral.

The southeast site has a two-tiered height limit of 160 and 200 feet above the level of the cathedral grounds. Because it occupies a promontory, it

would rise up to 235 feet above Morningside Drive. A parking lot and the former Cathedral Stoneworks fill the north site. The rose garden and playground on the southeast site would be relocated, Mr. Facey said.

Significant views of the cathedral would be preserved by the alignment of the envelopes, Mr. Kwartler said, including those along Amsterdam Avenue, down Morningside Drive and across Morningside Park.

Robert B. Tierney, chairman of the Landmarks Preservation Commission, said that the anticipated construction "would in no way detract from the cathedral" and that by allowing development, "we can be assured that the landmark will be protected in perpetuity."

But Carolyn C. Kent of the Morningside Heights Historic District Committee, a neighborhood preservation group, called the landmarks commission "actively complicit in this destructive spoiling."

"It would," she said, "visibly inflict on holy ground this new American century's apparent readiness to disrespect and spoil for profit our finest sites of art and architecture."