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Once Rebuffed, Frick Collection Restarts Its Expansion Push

After proposed loss of a prized garden united opposition last year, the museum starts again



Works by Rembrandt, Vermeer and others hang in the West Gallery of the Frick Collection. The original expansion proposal met opposition over plans for a new connecting building that would have replaced an outdoor garden. *PHOTO: STEVE REMICH FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL*

By **PIA CATTON**

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This time, the garden stays.

After controversy over a prized green space felled its most recent building plan last year, the Frick Collection is renewing expansion efforts, seeking an architecture firm to craft an upgrade that leaves the garden intact.

On Thursday, leaders of the Upper East Side museum and library said they intend to issue a formal request for qualifications from firms with expertise applicable to the Beaux-Arts mansion. A selection is expected later this year, with designs following in 2017.

The return to the drawing board comes after a controversial expansion plan, announced in 2014, was scrapped last June.

The proposal, which would have destroyed an intimate viewing garden created by British landscape designer Russell Page, sparked opposition from preservationists, civic groups, artists and architects. High-profile design professionals and local organizations joined together in an effort called Unite to Save the Frick.

In the wake of the criticism, the Frick dropped its plan.

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“We heard everyone. We listened, and we have decided not to build on the garden site,” said Ian Wardropper, director of the Frick. “What that means is we have to go back and look at alternatives.”

The Frick was first opened to the public in 1935, after the deaths of Henry Clay Frick in

1919 and Mrs. Frick in 1931. The threatened garden was added much later, in 1977, and was never intended to be accessible to the public, only viewed from the street or from inside the museum. Still, it is a rare example of Page’s work in New York, according to Simeon Bankoff, executive director of the Historic Districts Council, which advocates for the city’s historic neighborhoods.

“The garden is an important piece of late-20th-century landscape design by an acknowledged master of the form,” he said, adding that it should be considered the equal of artworks in the Frick’s collection.

Taking steps to expand the facility and keep the garden, he said, “shows a real flexibility on their part.”

The Frick receives about 300,000 visitors a year, but because it is a home retrofitted as a museum and library, improvements are needed to accommodate the growth of the collection, programming and visits, said Mr. Wardropper.

The expansion’s main goals include increased gallery space for special exhibitions and the permanent holdings, as well as improved back-of-house areas for the unloading of artworks and a more direct connection from the museum to the reference library.

Also on the wish list: areas for conservation work, educational programs and a



This 2015 photograph shows the garden at the Frick Collection in New York. Last June, the Frick announced it had abandoned plans for an expansion that would have replaced the museum's beloved garden and pavilion with a six-story addition. *PHOTO: KATHY WILLENS/ASSOCIATED PRESS*

potentially overhauled auditorium. The Frick's small theater, used for concerts and lectures, currently seats 164 but will reduce to 147 due to more strict application of fire-code regulations by the city.

"We are more and more turning people away from the auditorium because we simply don't have enough space," said Mr. Wardopper.

Opening up the second floor, where bedrooms were converted to administrative offices, has been part of plans for decades, but has now become a priority.

"That's really a key for us," said Mr. Wardopper. "It allows us to show more of the permanent collection and allows the public to access more of the original house."

The overall project could feature elements of new construction, but the building is landmarked, making any major visible changes subject to close scrutiny. Gaining added space will likely require reconfiguration or reorganization of areas either underground or currently under-used.

Last year, Unite to Save the Frick created its own plan and presented it to the institution's leadership.

"We looked at it very carefully and with great interest," said Mr. Wardopper. "There was very little that we hadn't already considered."

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