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Historic Miami Church Could Become Base of Condo Tower

by Eleazar David
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A Miami developer is proposing converting a 1920s Christian Science church north of downtown Miami into a grocery store.

But to pull it off, the developer is seemingly reneging on a compromise reached in March with preservationists to maintain the character of the building.

"It does seem to be much different than what was originally approved after compromise," said Daniel



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Plans to preserve a 1925 Christian Science church north of downtown Miami may allow the Neoclassical Revival to turn into a grocery store.

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Ciraldo, historic preservation officer of the Miami Design Preservation League, who was involved in the discussion earlier this year.

In an application set for review Tuesday by Miami's historic preservation board, developer Fifteen Group LLC is seeking approval to build a multilevel grocery in the former First Church of Christ, Scientist at 256 NE 19th St. Fifteen Group did not respond to a request for comment by deadline.

The plan is a significant departure from a preliminary plan backed by the board in March. That body, which initially opposed the development, gave its nod after a major concession by the developer involving building setbacks. The concession is missing from the latest proposal.

While that might normally threaten approval, this particular case is somewhat more complicated.

No one denies the significance of the 1925 Neoclassical Revival structure, which stands out in a neighborhood of high-rise condominiums and is listed on the National Register of Historic Places. But the building is not protected from demolition.



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Historic preservation officer Daniel Ciraldo said a compromise must be reached for the former First Church of Christ, Scientist because the building was not previously designated for protection.

If the preservation board and the developer do not reach a compromise, it's theoretically possible the developer could simply raze the church and rebuild with a blank canvas.

Ciraldo said that's the result of a City Commission decision in the 1980s to keep the structure off a list of historic properties protected from redevelopment and "is an example of what happens when a building is not protected in advance."

"This project would likely not be approved if the building were already designated for protection, he said.

"But since only a voluntary designation is possible in this case, a compromise has to be struck."

The plan approved in March suggested turning the former church into a retailer or grocery store while building a 47-story residential and parking tower on top. To appease preservationists, the developer cantilevered the parking garage over the old church and designed the new structure set back from the property line.

In the latest proposal, the developer is asking for variances to eliminate any setbacks from either Biscayne Boulevard or Northeast 19th Street. The building would be shorter by nine stories but more intense. Square footage would increase by 26 percent to 763,000 from 606,000, while parking would increase from 440 spaces to 637.

Plans for preserving the western side of the project, which constitutes the rear chapel, also would change.

The March proposal foresaw taking away the furniture, interior walls and ceilings in this part of the building, but keeping and restoring the building exterior. The new plan instead suggests demolishing the half-moon shaped rear of the church to make way for a more space-efficient loading berth.

Notably, while the devel-

oper is asking the preservation board to approve a project with demolition work, it's simultaneously asking to officially declare the building historic and protected. That would allow Fifteen Group to sell 2.05 million square feet in so-called development rights to other builders, a transferable benefit worth several million dollars.

It's not clear if Fifteen Group would develop the project after obtaining the entitlements or seek to flip the permitted development.

Wayne Pathman, a land-use attorney at Pathman Lewis in Miami, is not involved with Fifteen Group but has been involved in other disputes between developers and preservationists.

He said he's aware of the controversy over the church and thinks, since demolition is an allowed option, "the developer should be given credit given the compromise he's willing to reach."

Pathman said he's work-



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Land-use attorney Wayne Pathman, who has handled disputes between developers and preservationists before, said a developer should get credit for a compromise, especially when demolition is an allowable option.

ing with an undisclosed client on plans involving a historic building near the church and expects similar situations could happen in other areas of Miami's urban core.

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