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ON THE MARKET

Witnesses put waterfront tower up for sale

By Patrick Gallahue
The Brooklyn Papers

The Watchtower Bible and Tract Society of New York, also known as the Jehovah's Witnesses, announced this week their interest in selling their 1-million-square-foot building at 360 Furman St between Joralemon Street and Atlantic Avenue.

"We have a number of options out there that we are exploring," said Watchtower spokesman Robert Alexander. "We're waiting to see what … will come back."

Built in 1928 and acquired by the Watchtower Society in 1983, the 12-story building had been used for the Watchtower's printing and distribution operations. The organization will redistribute its printing plants to various international facilities and to a printing plant in upstate Wallkill.

"Our building at 360 Furman St. has served us well for many years, but we're relocating much of that work that was done there," Alexander said. "Perhaps this building will be used by others in a way that is compatible with the Brooklyn waterfront development."

The Furman Street announcement sparked the interest of local activists due to its proximity to and potential impact on the planned Brooklyn Bridge Park, a 1.3-mile commercial and recreational development that is to be built between Jay and Joralemon streets.

The park, as currently envisioned, would extend to Pier 5 at Joralemon Street but would have an Atlantic Avenue gateway entrance, meaning pedestrians would have to traverse around the Watchtower building at Furman and Atlantic to get to the park. [Updated plans for the park reveal the potential inclusion of Pier 6, which would lessen the impact of the building on the Atlantic Avenue gateway, see story this page.]

"I think this creates a sense of great possibility," said Marianna Koval, executive director of the Brooklyn Bridge Park Coalition, an advocacy group for the waterfront plan.

She said housing and possibly other uses such as the model presented by the Greenpoint Manufacturing and Design Center, a collection of businesses and artist studios now operating in a former rope factory, would be compatible with Brooklyn Bridge Park.

"It's a million square feet and it has absolutely spectacular views of the harbor and Lower Manhattan," Koval said. "I think we're enormously interested in the possibility that this wouldn't be a shipping and printing operation of any organization, religious or otherwise. The truck traffic and the volume of traffic has always been an issue not just for the park but the surrounding community."

Nancy Bowe, president of the Brooklyn Heights Association, also expressed a desire for park-compatible uses for the building.

"Its certainly very interesting," said Nancy Bowe, president of the Brooklyn Heights Association. "And we hope that whatever goes there is compatible with the park and traffic."

She declined, however, to voice opinions or concerns about the project until a specific proposal is made.

"That's something new to everybody," said Chip Place, the director of planning and design for the Brooklyn Bridge Park Development Corporation.

"It's something to keep in mind,

See **MARKET** *on page 4*



The Brooklyn Papers / Greg Mango

The Watchtower Society-owned building at 360 Furman St., as seen from the promenade at Remsen Street, is up for sale.

TA set to shaft the Heights
PAGE 2

June 9, 2003

MARKET...

Continued from page 1

but it hasn't really been factored in by anybody yet."

The building, which rises over the Brooklyn-Queen Expressway, is currently in a light manufacturing zone and Alexander said, "We do not intend to do anything with that current zoning but if some other organization were to ever obtain the structure then they could choose to pursue the rezoning."

Ben Klein, vice-president of operations for developer Shaya Boymelgreen, who is currently developing a number of projects in Downtown Brooklyn and DUMBO — including the reuse of the Empire Stores, on Water Street between Dock and Main streets, which will be developed into a mixed-use retail, cultural and commercial facility — was unfamiliar with the details of the building but said it appeared as an attractive site for a residential conversion.

"There are windows on all four sides, it molds perfectly into a residential use," he said.

Alexander said appraisals of the property had not yet been completed and that the Watchtower Society has not been approached by the Brooklyn Bridge Park Development Corporation, a subsidiary of the Empire State Development Corporation, which is planing the waterfront development.

The Watchtower Society was notified by the Port Authority of New York and New Jersey that their lease on Pier 5, which had been used as a 700-car parking lot for the facility, was not going to be renewed. Pier 5 is a major component of the Brooklyn Bridge Park plan.

They found accommodations for vehicles under another development in DUMBO.

The Watchtower Society plans to develop that three-acre parcel — bounded by Jay, Front Bridge and York streets — into a residential property for its members.

The building could host as many as 1,000 units of housing.

Alexander did not have a timeline for when they hoped to have a deal on 360 Furman St.