If the New York Life Insurance Company sells to someone who intends to convert the building into condominiums, they must first procure the approval of 15 percent of the building's current tenants.

N.Y. Life Could Get $600 M. For Big Manhattan House

By Michael Calderone
Built in 1950 by the architectural firms Skidmore, Owings & Merrill and Mayer & Whittlesey, Manhattan House heralded the burgeoning modernist style that has been hotly debated among architecture critics (and countless New Yorkers) for decades. Regardless of the theoretical squabbling, the postwar building’s impact on residential housing is rarely debated.

“This is the closest Manhattan offers, conceptually, to the ‘blocks’ of Le Corbusier,” according to the AIA Guide to New York City.

In 1952, the New York chapter of the American Institute of Architects chose Manhattan House for its “outstanding apartment building” award. The Bauhaus-styled balconies protruding from the 19-story structure are signature features; there is also an International Style lobby that made it distinct from the surrounding apartment buildings.

Also, in order to steer clear of the more conventional inner courtyard, the architects used an H-plan in their design that allowed far more light and cross-ventilation.

However, there was one obvious characteristic of Manhattan House that caused it to immediately stand out from the dingy neighboring tenements.

“It was the first ‘white-brick’ building in New York City,” said Seri Warden, executive director of Friends of the Upper East Side Historic Districts. (Although described in architectural circles as “white,” the self-cleaning exterior was closer to a light gray.)

“You can imagine it was quite shocking to see this huge white building built amongst all these tenements with the [Third Avenue] el rolling by,” she continued.

Indeed, for the first five years of its existence, Manhattan House residents still had to contend with the elevated
The first ‘white-brick’ building in the city, Manhattan House on East 66th Street, appears set for a condo conversion.

Tenants Must Approve

However, conversion cannot occur immediately after the closing. Unless the new owner opts for eviction proceedings—an unlikely scenario—they will have to put a conversion proposal to a vote and receive 15 percent support from the building’s tenants. There exists the balancing act between the sponsor and a building’s current residents (some of whom may have been living there for many years). Typically, a strong tenant association can get better “insider” prices for units if converted; the developer will make the majority of its profit from outside buyers.

Although far less than a conversion, New York Life has made some renovations in the past few decades, including replacing the original windows in the 1980’s. But overall, the building’s appearance hasn’t changed drastically.

At this point, the Landmarks Preservation Commission doesn’t formally protect Manhattan House; however, it’s doubtful whether a new owner could do much to the building’s renowned exterior.

Regardless, preservationists like those in Ms. Worden’s organization—who tried unsuccessfully to protect the Beekman Theater from the bulldozer—will surely be watching the outcome of this sale.

“Modern architecture is not just about the Upper East Side,” said Ms. Worden. “It’s about the whole city.”