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Large Riverdale Estate Gets Fourth Chance

By JOSH BARBANEL



Rob Bennett for The Wall Street Journal

A house on the Delafield Estates that is to be auctioned off.

Back in 1980, a plan to develop a wooded estate property in the Bronx seemed like a brilliant compromise for both environmentalists trying to preserve a natural area and real-estate interests looking to put up houses there.

A 10.4-acre Delafield Estates in Riverdale that once belonged to Edward C. Delafield, an early president of the Bank of America, was to be the site of a gated community of 33 compact houses, clustered together in small groups, while the rest of the property would be turned into a shared woodland. The Georgian-style Delafield Mansion would become a home for three families.

But more than 30 years later, only nine of the clustered houses are occupied. The 19th-century mansion is gone, destroyed by fire, and the woodland is pockmarked with old foundations overgrown with small trees and weeds. A pond at the property entrance is mostly swamp. Three teams of developers have tried and failed to finish the project.



Rob Bennett for The Wall Street Journal

Another house on the auction block.

Now Delafield Estates is getting a fourth chance. A bankruptcy trustee is scheduled to auction off two partly finished houses on Dec. 1. The trustee is working on plans to auction off the remaining 22 development lots early next year.

Tobias Schapiro, a broker with Brown Harris Stevens who is marketing the properties, said the initial auction could allow families to buy homes at a substantial discount to what nearby mansions were selling for on the western slopes of Riverdale at West 246th Street.

One bidder has offered a total of \$1.12 million for the two houses, according to court records. The bid includes \$700,000 for a house that is nearly complete, and \$420,000 for a second house that was stripped of all sheetrock, after years of damage from mold and raccoons.

The houses, which have four to five bedrooms, have rustic wood siding in need of repair.

The site plan was created by James Polshek, the New York architect and former dean of Columbia University's School of Architecture. It included groups of two or three attached houses, with rear decks, but only a small strip of privately owned land around each house. More than 70% of the site was to be shared open space.

Mr. Delafield donated the mansion and estate to Columbia in 1965 and asked that it be maintained as a botanical garden. For a while, the mansion was home to Nim Chimpsky, a chimpanzee whose ability to respond to sign language was widely studied.

In the mid-1970s when Columbia was facing budget shortfalls, the university put the property on the market. One plan for a much larger real-estate development with 72 homes on the site was rejected by the city.

In 1980, the city approved the 33-unit development plan, but in the weakening real-estate market in the late 1980s, the original developer and a subsequent buyer ran into financial difficulties, according to filings in the current bankruptcy case.



Rob Bennett for The Wall Street Journal

Unfinished construction on one of the houses.

The current owners of the unsold lots, Abraham Zion and his family, bought the units out of foreclosure in 1991 and filed for bankruptcy protection in 2005, without completing any additional houses.

They fought the city over back taxes that eventually totaled more than \$6 million, and were stymied by city complaints that the developers hadn't lived up to promises to restore and preserve trees on the property. They were unable to obtain certificates of occupancy for the two houses that were mostly completed.

Mr. Zion's son, Mark Zion, who was ordered evicted from one of the two houses by the bankruptcy court, said that the Delafield saga "has been forever and forever." He said there were "huge problems with the city" and that the community created "a lot of obstacles."

Now the bankruptcy trustee is working to develop a plan with the city to mitigate the damage to trees on the site and restore the property so a buyer of the unsold lots would be free to resume construction.

Arnold and Joan Stark have lived in house attached to one that was left open to the elements for more than 20 years. Mr. Stark said the experience was a horrible one, more akin to living in a slum than in Riverdale. Ms. Stark said the house next door was "a problem" but that she loved living on the Delafield property.

"Who else in New York has all this space in their back yard," she said. "It is wonderful, it is beautiful."

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