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## **Streetscapes/The Lambs Club; It Was Built for Theater Folks, Gambolers All**

By CHRISTOPHER GRAY

WITH the theoretical right to sell a developer the ability to add 75,000 square feet of space to a newly constructed building, the Church of the Nazarene should be swimming in cash in the Times Square real estate market.

But hindered by location and legal requirements, they'll be happy if they get permission from the New York City Landmarks Preservation Commission to build a few floors above their 1905 building at 130 West 44th Street, designed by Stanford White for the Lambs Club.

The Lambs Club was founded in 1874 by a group of theater people who met for dinner and conversation. They took their name from a similar group in London, which had met earlier in the 19th century at the house of Charles Lamb, the drama critic and essayist.

In New York, the Lambs occupied a series of rented quarters, and in 1888 began what they called their "gambols," special performances by members to which outsiders were invited. In the late 1890's, under the actor DeWolf Hopper, the "Shepherd" -- or president -- of the club, the gambols were used as fund-raising efforts for a new building. In 1898, the gambol went on a one-week, eight-city tour, raising \$67,000.

In 1903 the Lambs bought a site at 128 and 130 West 44th Street, near the emerging theater district, and retained Stanford White, a club member, to design a clubhouse. The architect developed a rich neo-Georgian design in brick, marble and terra cotta, with six rams' heads and two rams' profiles worked into the facade.

On the first floor were a grill room and a billiard room, with a bank of telephones in the lobby, on the second floor a banquet hall, and on the third floor a small theater. The top stories were given over to offices and sleeping rooms for members.

In 1914 The New York Times wrote "while many of the clubhouses of the Big Town display constantly the dignity and spirit of Greenwood Cemetery on a rainy Saturday afternoon, the Lambs is as full of snap and ginger as an outlaw bronco, a bunch of freshly lighted firecrackers." The club had about 1,400 members (past and present members at the time included Mark Twain, Edwin Booth, the prolific playwright and actor Dion Boucicault and David Belasco). In 1915 the clubhouse was doubled in size, in an alteration designed by George Freeman.

The 1920 census recorded actors, composers and movie producers among the residents of the Lambs, of whom the most prominent was Frank Mandel, who co-wrote the book for "No, No Nanette." In 1949 the Lambs began a new television show on NBC, "The Lambs Gambols," which included bits like Raymond Massey doing a song and dance routine.

A year later the Saturday Evening Post was able to point to such high points in the club's history as George M. Cohan's first performance of "Over There" at a gambol, and an early version of "Brigadoon" played by the composer Frederick Loewe on a piano in the grill. But much of the article was retrospective, for it was clear that the Lambs had been hurt by the eclipse of the New York stage by Hollywood.

In 1974 the club was designated a landmark, and a few years later it sold its building to the Church of the Nazarene: the club is now in shared space at 3 West 51st Street.

NOW the church, a Wesleyan evangelical sect based in Kansas City, Mo., is working on plans to gut the interior, creating a hotel with perhaps 150 rooms and a rear addition of another seven stories, invisible from the street. Bruce Reeves, a spokesman for the church, says the church initially tried to sell its 75,000 square feet of air rights, but that there was no nearby site, a requirement in such a transfer.

Then it sought to have its 250-seat theater declared a landmark, which would allow the transfer over a much wider area, but the landmarks agency is precluded from considering interiors of houses of worship.

Now, Mr. Reeves says the church has teamed up with Hampshire Hotels and Resorts for the hotel project, which will use only 25,000 square feet of the building's air rights. Their architect, William Q. Brothers, is working on a rear addition that will step back in a simple, modern style -- "something very light" says Howard Zipser, the lawyer representing both the church and the hotel group.

Mr. Reeves says the church originally calculated that it could build a nine-story addition, but to respond to the landmarks commission's concerns about visibility from the street, reduced the new structure to seven stories. Terri Rosen Deutsch, chief of staff of the commission, said that visibility of the planned new structure was the agency's primary concern.

The church, which has from 100 to 250 parishioners at a typical Sunday service, will retain offices and an assembly hall in the building, and use of common areas. The church expects to file plans with the Landmarks Preservation Commission early next year and, if the commission approves, erect the new building in about a year -- where possible salvaging woodwork, plaques and other architectural elements.

Mr. Reeves says that the Church of the Nazarene did consider selling instead of beginning what he estimates as a \$10 million to \$20 million project, but "for us, there's a very strong emotional attachment to that site."