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Discontent on a Tip of the Island at the Center of the World

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Ruby Washington/The New York Times

By JAKE MOONEY
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ON a cold morning last week, bundled-up tourists strolled south along the East River from the South Street Seaport, past the pier where they could buy helicopter rides and the ornate Battery Maritime Building, where opaque green waves lapped against steel foundations.

Some of the walkers approached the security guard who sits in a little

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blue booth nearby — the words “We were very tired, we were very merry” looming behind him on a mural inside the glass-walled Staten Island Ferry terminal — and asked for directions to the boat. He sent them around front to the terminal’s entrance, marked by a tall blue neon sign, then walked over to investigate a reporter who had been gazing up at the Maritime Building a bit too long.

The building, a long-overlooked gem at the tip of Manhattan Island, opened in 1909 as the terminal for a ferry to Brooklyn. After that line shut down in the 1930s, the city used the building mainly for offices and storage. But it recently underwent a \$60 million renovation sponsored by the city’s Economic Development Corporation, which is now overseeing a proposal by private developers to expand it with a hotel, restaurant and specialty food market. The guard said that when he had seen an artist’s rendering of a glass addition stacked onto its roof, he thought, “This is going to be some hotel.”

That, for good and for ill, has been the reaction of many people upon viewing the eye-catching rendering, which was on display at a Landmarks Preservation Commission session on the building last month. The local chapter of the [American Institute of Architects](#) praised the addition, which in the rendering is luminous glass, stretching the full width of the existing Beaux-Arts building and roughly equal to it in height. But preservation groups were split, and the commission ultimately sent the design back to the developers for revisions.

As for what an updated proposal might look like, the Dermot Company and the Poulakakos family, who are proposing \$110 million worth of work, were being circumspect.

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“We are working hard to make design modifications consistent with the Landmarks Preservation Commission and public comments,” Stephen Benjamin, a Dermot principal, said last week in a statement, “and are hopeful that the design will be even more successful than our previous submission.”

That submission’s relative success depends on who is judging. The [Municipal Art Society](#), a preservation group that last spring presented an award to the architectural firm that restored the building’s exterior, said the proposed addition, by Rogers Marvel Architects, would bring new life to an underused building.

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But the group also asked for changes to reduce its visual impact. “One of New York’s iconic views is from the water looking at Manhattan’s skyline,” said Lisa Kersavage, a Municipal Art Society spokeswoman, “so this would be quite visible from that point.”

Simeon Bankoff, executive director of the Historic Districts Council, another preservation group, was harsher. “They did such a terrific job of restoring that building that to put this ridiculous glass addition on top of it just runs counter to all that they did,” he said. “It just strikes me as the height of foolishness.”

Mr. Bankoff questioned the need for an addition at all, arguing that a hotel is an economically risky venture and suggesting that a restaurant, market or other retail establishment could fit inside the existing building.

“If we start plunking glass on top of every flat-roofed building on the waterfront, it would look very bizarre,” he said. “Especially lit-up glass.”

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Fredric Bell, executive director of the New York chapter of the American Institute of Architects, said his group preferred not to focus on the details of the artist’s rendering or even the size of the rooftop expansion, since those can all change during the planning process. Rather, he argued that the project is commendable for what it represents: a gathering place on the waterfront that respects the old building but brings new uses.

“Right now, that building has no reason to either welcome or stop people from going further,” Mr. Bell said. “People walk by it.”

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