

THE REAL DEAL

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Racing to the sky

Brooklyn, Manhattan developers compete for tallest building title



The Empire State Building's title of tallest building is being challenged by the Freedom Tower, second from left. Competing for tallest tower in Brooklyn are the Williamsburgh Savings Bank, City Point and City Tech Tower.

By LISA HAMMER

Seven years after the destruction of the Twin Towers, the Empire State Building remains the city's tallest structure at 1,250 feet. But the race to surpass it is on—as is a separate battle for height supremacy in Brooklyn. And the question on many minds is: How much longer will the Empire State Building hold the top spot?

Several new towers that have either been proposed or are under construction could strip it or the Brooklyn record-holder of their crown—or at least come close.

The 1,046-foot Chrysler Building, once the second-tallest building in the city, was recently demoted to third place when construction workers at the soon-to-be-complete Bank of America Tower erected the spire atop that building that brought it up to 1,200 feet.

The Bank of America Tower, which is on Sixth Avenue between 42nd and 43rd streets, is scheduled to get its first tenants in May 2008 and to be completely finished in mid-2009.

Meanwhile, the Freedom Tower, the centerpiece of World Trade Center redevelopment, is supposed to soar to 1,776 feet, but new reports suggest that the height may shrink because of new technological developments that could render the 408-foot antenna that is supposed to top it off obsolete.

Construction on the foundation for the Freedom Tower started in April 2006, and steel for the building will be visible early this year. If the building does actually hit 1,776

feet, it will oust the Empire State Building as the city's tallest structure.

However, the New York Sun recently published a story under the headline, "The Incredible Shrinking Freedom Tower," which said that the building's spire "could be jeopardized by new technology emerging as an alternative to the broadcast antenna." Without the spire, the tower would still be the tallest in the city, but would lose its symbolic 1,776-foot height and end up only surpassing the Empire State Building by a little more than 100 feet.

Competition to be the tallest building in the city is nothing new. Experts said the latest race is simply the quest of this generation. Anthony Robins, a historian specializing in New York City architecture, said, "We seem to be living through one of those enormous building booms that have changed the face of the city from one generation to the next."

He noted that the 1920s brought "the great art deco towers" like the Chrysler Building, the Empire State Building and the GE Building at Rockefeller Center, and that the 1950s and 1960s brought modernist glass towers like the Seagram Building.

"Today's real estate values, population growth and financing are bringing us more and larger new buildings than we've seen in a long time," he said.

Brooklyn Battle

The race for the tallest tower is also intensifying in Brooklyn, where the 512-foot, 34-

story Williamsburgh Savings Bank building is currently the building to beat. The bank-turned-condo is 738 feet shorter than the Empire State Building on the other side of the East River, but has been an iconic part of Brooklyn's skyline since it was erected in the 1920s and has become the borough's de facto height leader.

The 2004 rezoning of Downtown Brooklyn that allows for unlimited height restrictions has, however, paved the way for a new title holder in the borough. The contest has narrowed down to two contenders, which have both received a significant amount of attention in recent weeks.

Last month, the Brooklyn Eagle reported that the City Point tower being built at the former Albee Square Mall site in Downtown Brooklyn could become the borough's tallest building at 65 stories. The project is a collaboration among several developers and urban planners.

If realized, City Point would bring 900 apartments and 600,000 square feet of retail to the former Albee Square Mall site. The project is still in the proposal stage, and final plans still need to be submitted.

But City Point seems to be locked in a race with the somewhat similarly named City Tech Tower, which Atlantic Yards developer Bruce Ratner is erecting on nearby Jay Street. Several estimates, including one cited in the New York Post, have put that building, which is being designed by famed Italian architect Renzo Piano, at 1,000 feet. Ratner's team, meanwhile, has denied that height, saying

it is based on old renderings that found their way into the public arena.

Still, should Ratner's City Tech Tower achieve that height, or even anything higher than the Williamsburgh Savings Bank, it will serve as a victory for him. Just last year Ratner agreed to shrink the so-called "Miss Brooklyn" building on the Atlantic Yards site in order to secure government funding for the more than \$4 billion complex. The height of that Frank Gehry-designed building was originally slated to be 650 feet, but was later dropped to 511 feet, leaving it one foot shorter than the Williamsburgh Savings Bank building.

The haircut occurred after some argued that the project was out of scale with the neighborhood. City Council Member Letitia James was one of the elected officials vigorously fighting to ensure that Ratner did not surpass the Brooklyn bank. She has been quoted saying that the height was out of scale with the neighborhood and would further the "Manhattanization" of the borough.

City Tech spokesperson Michele Forsten explained that the rendering currently displayed on the City Tech Web site "is not the final drawing for the buildings." A spokesman for Ratner denied reports that the building would reach 1,000 feet.

Meanwhile, published reports say there are also about a dozen other buildings slated to soar over the 30-story mark in the borough in the next five years. And while they are not in the race to overtake the bank, they will undoubtedly raise the height bar. **TD**