

Tallest American skyscraper may rise along Chicago skyline

by Mike Ramsey

CHICAGO - Chicago 's famous skyline would gain a dominant new feature - North America 's tallest building - under an advancing project that has generated praise for its sculptural look but concerns over logistics.

Switzerland-based architect Santiago Calatrava last week unveiled his latest design for "The Chicago Spire," a twisting residential tower of 150 stories that would be completed near Navy Pier in 3 1/2 years. At 2,000 feet tall, the building would upstage two local icons, the Sears Tower (110 stories; 1,450 feet) and John Hancock Center (100 stories; 1,127 feet).

Irish developer Garrett Kelleher hopes to break ground by early June. But the highly publicized project - first announced in 2005 under a different sponsor - faces a pivotal series of votes in the next couple of months. Chicago's Plan Commission gets the first crack on April 19, setting the stage for a potential City Council decision in May.

Traffic flow around the proposed building, which would contain at least 1,200 high-end condominiums, is a bone of contention among residents of the already busy Streeterville district, but designers say they have addressed the issue with street ramps to ease congestion.

A more sobering fear is related to living in the post-Sept. 11 world: Would such a tall structure be a target of terrorists?

"It's a residential building," Tom Murphy, general counsel for the project, responded. "This is not going to be a collecting point for masses of population, nor is it a symbol of the American economy."

Murphy also noted that Calatrava, an architect-engineer who created the highly regarded addition to the

Milwaukee Art Museum, is familiar with the latest security standards, having designed transportation hubs around the world.

Meanwhile, skeptics wonder whether Kelleher can line up financing for a project that will cost hundreds of millions of dollars (a formal estimate has not been disclosed). The developer has said he will plunk down 30 percent, with the balance coming from banks. Large-scale American projects, including Donald Trump's new downtown Chicago skyscraper, typically depend on "pre-sales" of residential units before construction begins.

"Pre-sales is the more recent tradition in American financing - it is not a European tradition," Murphy said. "European developers, as a group, put in a lot of equity."

Calatrava's basic concept for the Spire, described as resembling a wisp of smoke or a birthday candle, remains. The crowning antenna from previous incarnations is gone, but the building's tapering trunk would rotate a full 360 degrees.

"It will definitely hugely stand out, but the good part of it is, it's very majestic," Gail Spreen, president of Streeterville Organization of Active Residents, said. "We understand something's going to get built there, we just want to make sure it works well in the community."

Spreen said her neighborhood group could take a formal stance on the project as soon as this week.

To some, Calatrava's building of the future holds the key to finally honoring a key figure from Chicago's past: Jean Baptiste Point DuSable. DuSable (1745-1818) was a trader of mixed race who is considered the city's original settler; he spent part of his life in what is today Peoria.

Developers have offered to help pay for the long-delayed, \$12 million DuSable Park, which would revamp a 3-acre former brownfield site at the mouth of the Chicago River. Calatrava has integrated the proposed park into his latest model for the tower; the building site and land are separated by Lake Shore Drive. Robert O'Neill, president of the Grant Park Conservancy, praised the design.

"It's a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to connect the Spire and the park and have the design services of one of the world's top architects," he said.

The Chicago Spire, if built, would not be the tallest building in the world. That honor is expected to go to the Burj Dubai, a tower of more than 2,500 feet under construction in the United Arab Emirates.

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