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BLACKOUT

Developer plans a blackout-proof luxury building

By Lincoln Anderson



Villager photo by Lincoln Anderson

Lewis Kwit, left, and Nino Vendome on Washington St.

After 9/11, trying to develop a luxury building in Hudson Sq., a neighborhood not far north of ground zero, Nino Vendome had a vision of a new type of tower. It would be environmentally sophisticated enough to keep residents safe when the air was not. Standing on the corner of the site where the building is planned, at Spring and Washington Sts., last Thursday afternoon after the blackout had started, Vendome had one thing to say: I told you so.

Not only will the building he hopes to construct filter out bad air, it will function even in a power outage.

“You see this building here,” Vendome said. “It’s going to be blackout proof. We were the first to go to NYSERDA to get new construction technology.”

Vendome was referring to the New York State Energy and Research Development Authority, which provides funding and technology for energy efficient designs.

With him was Lewis Kwit of Energy Investment Systems, Inc., who shares Vendome’s office on the second floor of the former butter and eggs warehouse where Vendome hopes to build. Kwit does all the energy consulting for Vendome’s other properties.

“All of my buildings are energy efficient,” Vendome said. “When we were talking about ‘Let’s have a blackout-proof building,’ people were thinking this is just a cachet statement. This is real.”

In the earlier project Vendome planned for the site, called the Habitable Sculpture, designed by legendary architect Philip Johnson, “we were seriously thinking about putting a windmill on top,” he noted. It would have been horizontal, like a turbine.

The community fought the Habitable Sculpture and defeated it, and now Vendome plans to come back with a smaller, 11-story building, about half the size, again designed by Johnson. It is apparently not the same design that was released subsequent to the Habitable Sculpture’s defeat, but a third design.

This new building will be as energy efficient as possible, he said.

“We’re very concerned about the issue of air toxicity after 9/11,” he noted.

There will be an air filter system. Vendome says asbestos particles from the trade center fallout are still all over bricks on buildings and still lingering in the local environment, another reason to filter the air.

The building will probably have some sort of backup generator and “may be on its own grid,” Vendome said.

He and Kwit are planning to use “photo voltaic” systems, or solar power, to create electricity, not just to heat water.

Vendome realizes he is breaking new ground in creating an energy efficient residential building.

“NYSERDA has many incentives for office buildings, but not residential buildings. But we’re committed,” he noted.

In other details of the project, Vendome said the top floor will be a replica of Philip Johnson’s famous “Glass House” and that the building will be called “The Urban Glass House by Philip Johnson.” The whole project will be a work of art, a tribute to Johnson, 97. “You don’t have to buy a unit to appreciate this,” the developer said. “We are going to develop this site. I am committed to building something with redeeming social values.”

Vendome said he also hopes to redo the facades of his two low-rise buildings on the block on the corner of Spring and Greenwich Sts., so that they are contextual with the new building, but won’t make them any taller.

He said he plans to have something to show on the new building’s design in about a month.

Just to prove that he’s serious about the environmental aspect of the project, Vendome showed a visitor up to the roof of the warehouse to a patio-style table under an umbrella on which lay the document he said he had just been going over with Kwit when the blackout hit: The paper was headlined “Green Building” and detailed the project’s special features.ÅÅ