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Market Nears A Landmark

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By LANA BORTOLOTT

Whole Foods Market Inc. faces a series of City Council votes starting next week to win final approval for construction of a 52,000-square-foot supermarket next to a 140-year-old landmark in Gowanus, Brooklyn.



Enlarge Image

Eric Haugesag for The Wall Street Journal

The Coignet building today next to the planned Whole Foods grocery site

The new store is planned to wrap around two sides of the vacant Coignet building, the city's earliest known concrete building, at the corner of Third Avenue and Third Street. After expected council approvals, the grocery chain would be allowed within five feet of the old building and wants to have its first Brooklyn store open in 2013.

Built in 1872 for the New York & Long Island Coignet Stone Co., the 2½-story

building is the sole survivor of a five-acre industrial park built along the Gowanus Canal in the early 1870s.

The elegant Italianite mansion provided office space for Coignet and subsequent companies, including its longest-running tenant, the Brooklyn Improvement Co., from which Coignet leased the land for its stone works.

"It's a lonely little building," said Jennifer Gardner, a researcher at the Gowanus Institute, a local think tank. "To some degree, the plans for that site will limit the opportunity for the [Coignet] building, but also provides a potential draw for people to see it and appreciate it in a different way."

The building received city landmark status in 2006. Two City Council panels overseeing landmarks and planning will vote next week on whether to reduce the Coignet building's lot size to about 1,720 square feet from 6,250 square feet, a measure that's already been passed by the Landmarks Preservation Commission. If approved, a full City Council vote on the measure is slated for April 18.

Some residents and preservationists still fear the landmark building will lose its prominence as it is enveloped by the store,

"It's strange to be shrinking a landmark

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Manéne Donnelly, Friends & Residents of Greater Gowanus

An undated rendering of the Coignet building in Gowanus

site; it allows any site to be looked at as a development," said Nadezhda Williams of the Historic Districts Council, a preservation organization lobbying for rejection of the variance. "We need something more sympathetic, that doesn't take away its prominence."

Ms. Williams and others point to the Fairway supermarket in Red Hook—which integrated unlandmarked Civil War-era warehouses into its design—as

a model for treatment of the Coignet. The Brooklyn Navy Yard faces a related issue with its recent acquisition of Admiral's Row, which abuts the parcel designated for a 74,000-square-foot supermarket.

Whole Foods doesn't own the Coignet building, but the food retailer plans to "give it a facelift" approved by the landmarks commission, said company spokesman Michael Sinatra. The grocer has no plans to rehab the interior or to use the historic building, whose owner, Richard Kowalski, couldn't be reached.

Designed by William Field & Son, the curious building was a showcase for Beton Coignet, a new concrete developed in France by François Coignet in the 1850s.

The Brooklyn mansion was built of the very material it championed and displayed various architectural features and ornament cast from molds, showing that concrete could replicate the stone-and-chisel method of old.

"It was definitely an advertisement [for the company]. They put it on the most visible position on the lot," said Matthew Postal, a landmarks commission researcher who studied the Coignet building, "This is a building that was testing a new technology; it would be an engineering landmark."

Noteworthy commissions using the new building material included portions of St. Patrick's Cathedral, the Metropolitan Museum of Art and the Cleft Ridge Span in Prospect Park, the oldest such arch in the country. Coignet also supplied concrete for new residential developments, simultaneously rising to prominence with the Brooklyn Improvement Co., founded by Edwin Clark Litchfield.

Indeed, the Coignet stone works was the impetus for Mr. Litchfield to reactivate the Gowanus creek as a working waterway for transport of raw and finished materials.

"It was a fully integrated site. One can only imagine the scale of that operation when it was fully activated," said Gregory Dietrich, a preservation consultant who is surveying the site for possible inclusion on the National Register of Historic Places.

Despite its successes, the Coignet company filed for bankruptcy in 1873 and the factory closed in 1882.

The Coignet building housed the offices of Mr. Litchfield's company until 1957 and a variety of tenants until its final occupants left in the mid-1970s.

"It's quite lovely and by any objective standards it represents an important architectural element in the Gowanus corridor that resonates with neighbors," said Craig Hammerman, district manager of Community Board Six, which includes Gowanus and which has supported the new Whole Foods store.

"It is so highly distinctive I could see it easily being a museum—it has such an interesting story," Mr. Dietrich said. "It's a diamond in the rough."



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