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Condo Project at Former Hospital Site Moves Forward in Brooklyn

The High End

By C.J. HUGHES



The contentious plan to turn yet another New York hospital into condominiums, this time the former Long Island College Hospital in [Cobble Hill, Brooklyn](#), or LICH, has been a bruising experience for everyone involved since it was first announced in 2015.

Neighborhood residents have slammed the [Fortis Property Group](#) project for being too large and too walled-off, and for offering too few medical services to replace what had already been there.

Developers have grown agitated as efforts to include affordable housing and a public school in exchange for the right to build bigger — a trade-off that might have mollified some critics — have gone nowhere. “It would have been better to have known ahead of time, so we wouldn’t have wasted so much time and money,” said [Jonathan Landau](#), Fortis’s chief executive. “We were frustrated.”

A rendering of the Polhemus Building, built in 1897, at the corner of Henry and Amity Streets in Cobble Hill. Credit Williams NY

Wounds may still be raw, but now the six-building, eight-townhouse project, newly branded as River Park, has taken a major step forward.

This month, the development began marketing its first batch of homes, a mixture of condo units tucked inside the historic hospital building and the eight new townhouses.

The 17 one- to three-bedroom condo units are in the French Renaissance Revival-style Polhemus Building, completed in 1897. It once served as a teaching facility, where doctors-in-training could watch demonstrations with cadavers, and the clinic was equipped with one of the first X-ray machines in existence, according to historical accounts. The building, at the corner of Henry and Amity Streets, is on the westernmost edge of today's Cobble Hill Historic District, with views in four directions. Surviving details include a paneled room that was once a library and dean's office, which will be converted into a living-and-dining room, Mr. Landau said.

The units, designed by [BKSK Architects](#), have ceilings as high as 14 feet, Gaggenau appliances, master baths with chandeliers and radiant-heated floors, and tall windows that, in some cases, have been widened with city approval. Prices start at about \$1.6 million, with a building-wide average of about \$1,750 a square foot; sales are being handled by [Douglas Elliman](#).

The eight new townhouses, on Amity Street, are offered in two widths: an unusual 16-foot version, with four bedrooms, and a more conventional 20-foot size, also with four bedrooms. Finishes include oak floors and marble kitchen counters; all homes have private backyards. Prices range from about \$6 million to \$8.5 million.

While townhouses may be common in Cobble Hill, condos are less so. There were just five non-River Park condominiums on the market there in early April, according to [StreetEasy](#).

The Fortis development, which has a price tag of about \$1 billion (including the \$240 million paid for the multiblock site), will begin construction of three more condominium buildings this year.

One River Park, at Hicks Street and Atlantic Avenue near the Brooklyn-Queens Expressway, will have units ranging from studios to three-bedrooms, all with a view of New York Bay, according to Fortis. The 18-story building, by [FXFowle](#), will replace a parking garage.

Five River Park will offer one- to four-bedroom condos along Henry Street, where medical offices once stood, and at 2 River Park, a high-rise of cast-stone and glass intended to resemble a sail, units will range in size from studios to four-bedrooms, according to Fortis.

Two other residential pieces of the Fortis development are to be completed in 2023: 3 River Park, a new building, and 4 River Park, a conversion of a red brick former hospital building. Designs have not yet been finalized, Mr. Landau said, adding that the total number of units for the entire development could reach 500.



Upper Van Voorhees Park. Credit Danny Ghitis for The New York Times

As for turning hospitals into condominiums, River Park has plenty of company. The [Greenwich Lane](#) in Greenwich Village, for instance, was once St. Vincent's, while [Gramercy Square](#) in Gramercy Park was the Cabrini Medical Center.

But the furor over LICH, which was closed by the state in 2014 amid financial struggles, prompting numerous lawsuits, may have been the most intense. Though a branch of [NYU Langone Medical Center](#) subsequently opened at the site, critics have pointed out that the much smaller facility is not a full-fledged hospital.

Under the current plans, NYU Langone will increase the size of its Cobble Hill facility from 30,000 square feet to around 100,000 square feet by 2019, and will move to a new location on the site, Mr. Landau said.

Bad blood remains. "It's been a rocky process," said Amy Breedlove, president of the [Cobble Hill Association](#), a neighborhood advocacy group. "Of course we are happy to have something that is not going to hurt property values," she said. Based on early marketing, though, she thinks the somewhat self-contained River Park may turn its back on the community. "I find that problematic," she said.

But Fortis may offer olive branches, which could also please buyers. The company is considering rehabbing Upper Van Voorhees Park, a sliver of city-owned land by the expressway, out of its own pocket, and perhaps constructing a streetlight-lined sidewalk

along busy Hicks Street to allow better access to another nearby green space, [Van Voorhees Park](#), Mr. Landau said.

Under a rezoning scheme Fortis had considered for the site, River Park might have built at a much larger scale. That plan, which would have included affordable units, was scrapped abruptly last fall after Fortis got too much pushback from its neighbors, Mr. Landau said.

Looking back, he said, the challenges seem almost inevitable: “It’s difficult to introduce change into classic communities.”

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