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For Shakespeare, a Home That's a Castle?

By ROBIN POGREBIN

If all the world's a stage, why not Castle Williams, that crumbling bulwark on Governors Island, with its stone fortifications, circular courtyard and haunting past as a military prison? The British architect Norman Foster has designed an adaptation of Shakespeare's Globe Theater in London that would fit inside the 194-year-old castle and serve as a stage for Shakespeare productions and other performing arts.

The theater is one of several proposals being considered for the site by the National Park Service, which owns and operates 22 acres of the 172-acre island, a former military installation in New York Harbor that includes Castle Williams and Fort Jay.

The Park Service is currently soliciting online public input and suggestions for the site's future, said Linda Neal, the superintendent of the Governors Island National Monument for the Park Service, who described the Globe proposal as exciting.

So far, the Park Service has drafted three broad alternatives for public use of the site, one of which calls for a cultural component.

The next step will be to issue a formal request for proposals, Ms. Neal said. "We're looking for the best use that will preserve the building long term and enliven the area." The driving force behind the Globe proposal is Barbara C. Romer, 34, a former management consultant at McKinsey & Company, who earned her doctorate in art history at Cambridge University and has worked for museums in Japan, France and Britain.

She has established an advisory committee that includes the top executives of Shakespeare's Globe in London; the actress Estelle Parsons; Randall Bourscheidt, president of the Alliance for the Arts; and Frank E. Sanchis III, the senior vice president of the Municipal Art Society.

The open courtyard of Castle Williams could serve as an amphitheater identical in size to Shakespeare's Globe, Ms. Romer said. "It is three tiers high, perfectly round," she said. "If you place a blueprint of the Globe onto a blueprint of Castle Williams, it fits like a hand into a glove."

Ms. Romer said the Municipal Art Society planned to place a model of the Foster design on exhibition in its lobby at 457 Madison Avenue on Monday.

Gerry Halliday, a spokesman for the Globe in London, a 1997 reconstruction of the 1599 original, said, "We wish them all the best."

Other theaters around the world have modeled themselves after the Globe, Mr. Halliday said. And there is at least one effort to create one in Lower Manhattan. Ron Song Destro, an actor, director and playwright, has been trying to build support for what he calls the Oxford Shakespeare Center downtown. Sites he has considered are a warehouse in the South Street Seaport and the area near Hanover Square.

As part of the new BAM Cultural District, Theater for a New Audience, which focuses on Shakespeare, is building a theater designed by Hugh Hardy and Frank Gehry in Downtown Brooklyn.

Ms. Romer said she hoped a Globe on Governor's Island would draw audiences from Brooklyn, Staten Island and New Jersey, as well as from Manhattan.

The cost of the new theater is estimated at \$78 million, including renovation of the castle, Ms. Romer said. She has already spent \$350,000 on the model stage, which was covered by private donations.

Built in 1811, with eight-foot sandstone walls and 102 guns, Castle Williams has long been considered one of the finest examples of a coastal fortification in the United States. It helped defend New York from British forces during the War of 1812, and it was used by the Union Army as a prison for Confederate captives during the Civil War, and later for American soldiers who committed military crimes or misdemeanors. From 1966 to 1997 it was run by the Coast Guard. Since then it has languished, falling into disrepair.

Unlike the open-air Globe in London, the New Globe -- as the Governors Island theater would be called -- is to have a roof, possibly a retractable one, to allow for year-round performances, Ms. Romer said. The roof also offers expansive views. "You can see from the Verrazano Bridge to the Statue of Liberty," she said. "You face the skyline and see the Brooklyn Bridge."

Lord Foster has enclosed the theater in glass, to allow people circulating in the fort to look inside at performances in progress.

The new theater would seat 1,200; the Globe in London seats about 1,600. The New Globe would offer 400 groundling tickets priced at \$10, subsidized by 800 competitively priced gallery seats, according to Ms. Romer's proposal.

Drawings by Lord Foster's firm show a bright circular lobby with views of Manhattan. There would also be a museum, a bookshop and on-site child care for theatergoers.

The groundlings stand in London, but in Lord Foster's design, chairs under the floor provide the option of seating. Ms. Romer said she was inspired to pursue the project after seeing the broad spectrum of people who attended Shakespeare's Globe. "There were kids in ripped jeans who had clearly never been to the theater before next to people in suits and black tie," she said.

While the New Globe is modeled after its London counterpart, the theater would be its own innovation, Ms. Romer said. "I'm not interested in doing a wooden replica -- that to me would be a theme park," she said. "We're very much looking at the 21st-century American counterpart to the Globe."

Aside from its restoration, the fort's exterior would remain untouched, Ms. Romer said. (It was designated a national monument in 2001.) "We would be rehabilitating the castle, preserving it, being true to its historic integrity," she said. "It's fully reversible. You could pull out the theater and be left with a castle."

Indeed, Ms. Romer said, the two would function independently of each other. People could explore the castle without going to the theater, and vice versa, although she said she hoped that visitors would take advantage of both.

Ms. Romer said she approached Lord Foster for the project because of his experience as an architect

"who reimagines and revitalizes monuments of historic significance," like the British Museum in London and the Reichstag in Berlin.

In addition to presenting Shakespeare, the theater could produce contemporary plays and accommodate a resident company with living quarters on the island, Ms. Romer said.

Although there is some question whether people will travel to Governors Island for the theater, Ms. Romer emphasized that it is only a five-minute ferry ride. "People will come for the world-class setting," she said.