

Cartoon museum loses future home

By Brooke Springer
Staff Writer

Mort Walker's National Cartoon Museum is closing before it ever opened at the Empire State Building.

The museum was scheduled to open on the first three floors of the iconic Manhattan skyscraper in spring with more than 200,000 pieces of comic art, including Walker's Beetle Bailey comic strips. Instead, they remain boxed in a warehouse on Canal Street in Stamford.

"It's a big disappointment. I really felt like we had a perfect situation," Walker said in a phone interview yesterday from his Stamford studio, which he had begun to decorate with drawings and figurines of the Empire State Building.

A city official has suggested that the museum move to Walker's hometown and establish itself in the vacant Old Town Hall in downtown Stamford.

The museum struggled to find a permanent home since it opened in Greenwich in 1974. A year later, it moved to a castle in Rye Brook, N.Y. Please see **MUSEUM**, Page A6

Museum

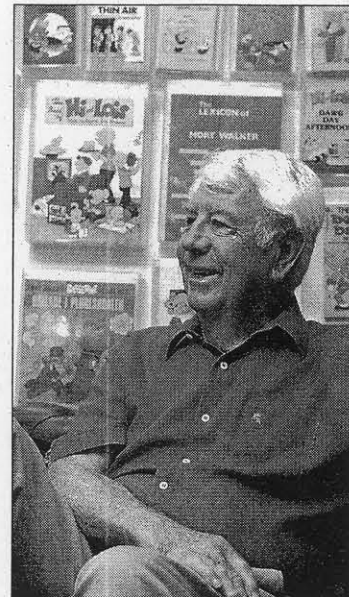
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but maintenance costs forced it out. It found its third home in Boca Raton, Fla., but eventually had to close after some of its backers went bankrupt.

Peter Malkin, a Greenwich real estate magnate who serves as chairman of the group that owns the Empire State Building, said yesterday he had been saving space for the museum, rent-free, for more than a year, and had been a supporter of bringing the comic art to the Big Apple. He said he had no choice but to put the 14,000-square-foot space back on the market when he saw construction had not begun.

"We had signed a lease, and under the lease they were supposed to go in and create the space for the museum and do work by a certain date," Malkin said in a phone interview yesterday. "They were not able to proceed with that, and we extended the date several times. But it was necessary finally to terminate the arrangement because they had not been able to proceed with their program. We're disappointed that it has not worked out as Mort had and we had hoped, but we just have to go forward with a more traditional, commercial use of the space."

Walker tells a different story. "They changed the deal on us," he said last week. "They were going to sell our tickets when they sold tickets to the observation tower. We were going to split the ticket sales. They turned around and said they couldn't do it. They put our rent at \$650,000.



Staff file photo

Mort Walker, creator of the comic strip Beetle Bailey, sits in his North Stamford studio last year. He is working to find a home for the National Cartoon Museum.

We found that too difficult, so our lease was canceled."

Walker hoped to attract 700,000 of the 3.5 million people who visit the Empire State Building's observatory each year. He said the original deal was for the museum to have the space rent-free in exchange for half the proceeds of ticket sales, which he estimated would be \$7 million.

He said the building's owners reneged after another attraction in the building, which provides simulated helicopter

tours of Manhattan, threatened to sue to block the ticket-sale arrangement. Currently, combination tickets are sold only for the observatory and the helicopter simulator attraction.

"No hard feelings. Sometimes things don't work out as one would hope, and I'm afraid this was just one of those things," Malkin said.

Walker said he is looking at a few locations in New York City to house the collection, which he estimates is valued at least \$20 million and includes original Mickey Mouse drawings by Walt Disney.

"The city had granted us \$1.8 million," he said, referring to New York. "We hope that if we find another location, they'll allow us to still have that."

Walker may be interested in moving the museum to his hometown and has his eye on the vacant Old Town Hall, according to Sandy Goldstein, executive director of Stamford's Downtown Special Services District.

She suggested the idea two weeks ago to fellow members of the Old Town Hall Redevelopment Authority. Walker was noncommittal last week.

"We're considering everything, but... we can't really say we're going to go to one place or another," he said.

Walker said he doesn't consider any of the museum's moves failures. Though Walker said he's discouraged, he will not give up on the museum.

"We know we've got something good here. It's just a matter of working it out," he said.